



成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

56 Knights' Strange Night ゴロゴロ

電撃文庫



With sleepy eyes, the girl with the bloodstained lead pipe mumbles.
"On island. There is gunshots again. Like always. People die. Like always.
Dog and dog. Inui and Mr. Kugi. Try to kill each other. Like always. Eastern
boss. He is creepy. Like always.

Nap friend Killer Ghoul. Kitty in East. Sword woman in East. Elder Brother
Lihuang. Adorable detective's not-adorable brother.

Everyone is clumsy. Clumsy love. Like always. Chaos on island. ...Like
always.

So like always. Island is like always. It is simple.

So like always. I find adorable children. I hug adorable children. Hug. It is
warm. It is cozy.

...Sleepy. Sleeeeeep. Mmm...zzz..."

It's time for the lively Etsusa Bridge short story collection!



成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

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There are only three kinds of people on this island.

The first are the fools who can read the flow.

The second are the fools who cannot read the flow.

And the third and final kind are also fools.

Those who are fully capable of reading the flow, yet choose to ignore it.

The swindler of the East, the seven-colored dog,

The radio woman, and even my personal shadow belong to that category.

And in the latter's case...

He ignores the flow in order to reject himself. The most foolish of them all.

Strictly speaking, they should intervene as little as possible in this outrageous festival.

They should simply observe from afar,

Taking no part in the chaos.

And though they know this full well...

They nevertheless approach the fray and set foot inside.

...And in Seiichi's case...

My chiding would never convince him to end his game with the seven-colored mongrel.

Such a fool, that dog of mine.

Yet it is only more charming, you see.

For a man to be very slightly foolish.

Although I suppose you're a little too young to understand this, Lilei.



56 Knights' Strange Night ゴロゴロ56!

雨霧八雲

島内最悪の殺人鬼と
噂される男。口癖は
『俺は、まともだ』。



シャーロット

探偵気取りの米英ハ
ーフ。ドジ少女？



シャーロック

シャーロットの弟。皮
肉屋。



雪村ナズナ

東の護衛部隊員であ
る刃物使いの少女。
八雲に好かれている。



葛原宗司

西区画の自警団長で
ある、元警察官。島の
番犬。



ケリー

島の情報源である海
賊放送『ぶるぶる電
波』のオーナーである
女性。



ギータルリン

東区画を仕切る組織
のボス。通称、暇人魔
神。



イーリー

西区画を仕切る組織
の幹部。中国人と英
国人のハーフ。



戌井隼人

元山賊にして海賊で
あった青年。かつて人
工島の最下層の中心
だった狂犬。



狗木誠一

自暴自棄な青年。イー
リーの右腕である獵
犬。



リーレイ

イーリーの妹。鉄バイ
プを持った組織の始
末屋。可愛い物が好き。



麗凰

イーリーの兄。島を管
理する西区画の幹部。
冷徹で凶暴な男。



名もなきオヤジ

本土から来たばかり。リーレイを天使だと思いこんでいる。

Dramatis Personae

Yakumo Amagiri: The man rumored to be the island's most atrocious killer. His catchphrase is "I'm normal".

Charlotte: A clumsy half-American half-British girl who's all about detective work.

Sherlock: Charlotte's younger brother. Sardonic.

Nazuna Yukimura: A swordswoman in the Eastern District's Guard Team. Loved by Yakumo.

Souji Kuzuhara: A former police officer, and captain of the Western District's volunteer police force. The island's guard dog.

Kelly: An informer and the producer-slash-DJ of Buruburu Airwaves, a pirate radio station.

Gitarin: The boss of the organization that controls the Eastern District. Also known as the Demonic Rogue.

Yili: An executive of the organization that controls the Western District. Half-Chinese and half-British.

Hayato Inui: A former bandit, now with pirate experience. The mad dog who was once at the center of the Pits.

Seiichi Kugi: A young man who has given up on everything. A hunting dog who was previously Yili's right-hand man.

Lilei: Yili's younger sister. A member of the organization's executive squad who wields a lead pipe. Likes cute things.

Lihuang: Yili's older brother. An executive and an overseer of the Western District. A vicious man of little pity.

Nameless man: A new arrival to the island. Convinced that Lilei is an angel.

Entrance

Early morning. A certain day in a certain month in the year 2021.

At that moment, the island was unquestionably peaceful.

Though it had been but a few short months since the serial bombings, everyday life was coming back to the islanders.

Then again, 'peaceful' was a purely subjective descriptor of the island.

A man and a woman were crossing a ruin littered with debris and garbage.

The ocean breeze was tinged with the scent of rust and stale oil.

The area was likely intended to be an event hall in a large shopping mall or department store. Sunlight refracted in every direction, casting a gentle glow in the space the couple walked.

But whatever the original design, this place no longer served its intended function.

The floors were not polished to a shine, instead coated in wind-blown dirt. Weeds shook in the breeze, screaming out the fact that they were growing in a ruin.

Dotting the graffiti walls were what seemed to be bullet holes. The area was full of tools and abandoned construction material, where only the places people walked were cleared.

In the center was a dried-out fountain. Several people lay around it with pieces of plywood under them, but none reacted to the couple's presence.

Some of the colors on the wall were clearly bloodstains. Anyone who had lived a normal life would see them and think—

That it was not a good idea to be there.

But everyone in that space had set foot inside with full knowledge of that fact.

At that moment, it was peaceful.

The surroundings were difficult to identify as such, but the couple looked quite at ease, like they were returning from a shopping trip.

There was no gunfire, and no screaming.

That was all it took for them to deem the moment a peaceful one.

"There. Hey, maybe this is a good place?"

A woman in blue shades was carrying a plywood-thin screen.

With her fair skin and shimmering blond hair, she could pass for a typical beauty if she said nothing; unfortunately, it seemed silence was a foreign concept to her as she spewed a spray of words into the air.

"Fuck it, it's goddamned peaceful today! Boredom being lethal's usually just a saying, but in my case entertainment puts food on my table and I am five seconds away from starvation! Boredom kills hearts and bodies. It's the world's most prolific killer. You kill one man, and you're a murderer, and you kill a hundred, and you're a hero. Then what's boredom? It definitely bumps people off, yessir, but nobody can prove it. Then what? Then maybe boredom's not a hero *or* a murderer—maybe it's closer to being God or the Devil! Heehahahahaha! Maybe I should come up with a new religion while I'm at it. There are three doctrines. Don't have fun, don't get angry, don't get sad! Would that work? We're already dead to society, anyway. See? There you have it, folks! Boredom *is* lethal! Heehahahahaha! I'm right, right? You think so too, right, right, Kuzu?"

The woman guffawed like an automatic laughing doll, her face reflected on the paper-thin screen that weighed less than a kilogram.

The person she called 'Kuzu' was a towering man carrying a collapsible stepladder behind her.

"Sorry, didn't catch that."

"Aw, what the hell, dumbass? Is the heat getting to you? Or did you hit your head on a cicada from the mainland and lose your brain whole? Heehahaha."

"My brain's perfectly fine. Which is how I filtered out everything you said."

"Heehahahaha! Die, jackass! Gimme back everything I just said! Don't you feel bad about all that energy drumming at your ears? Looks like trash really doesn't know a thing about energy efficiency."

Then the woman stopped in the midst of her angry laughter, and looked up at a lone pillar standing before her.

"Then again, I could kill you real good under the blankets back in the van later. We gotta hurry and get this job done first."

"...What's the point installing a screen here when it's obviously going to get stolen or vandalized? This place isn't clearly on either of the sides—it's almost like the Pits. People who couldn't fit into either district end up here."

"Yeah, yeah. But even if the thing gets stolen in one hot minute, it's cool to work hard for even that one hot minute's sake. Heehahahaha!"

"You're not sounding very convincing."

Though he complained, the man readily unfolded the stepladder and got to work with tools in hand. He seemed to be installing the screen onto the pillar.

"Nuff complaining. If you wanna make it worth your while, just get the volunteer police to watch the thing day and night."

"What are we, your personal cronies?"

"You're already Yili's personal cronies. What's the harm in adding one more boss?"

The man sighed and climbed the stepladder, then attached the TV stand to the pillar.

"Anyway, are you serious about this? The radio's blubbery enough without the video broadcasts you're plotting."

"Heehahahaha! Who the hell says crap like 'blubbery' to a lady? That's a word you reserve for boiling zombies in a stew!"

"That's revolting!"

It was hard to tell if they were being hostile or affectionate, but the man continued to work. "Apparently my grandfather loved communal televisions when he was young. Back then, no one would have expected that someday every house would have a TV. He said the entire neighborhood would gather in one place to watch things like pro wrestling."

"Heehaha! Pro wrestling? That's damned fantastic, Kuzu! Whoo! Whaddaya say to calling Zhang over for a scuffle in front of the camera? You served him good once, didn't ya?"

"I just got lucky."

With a wry grin, the man received the screen and installed it on the pillar. He checked to see it was steady, and mumbled.

"...It might look more impressive if we try matching the Shinjuku Alta building. This thing we have here really looks like a communal TV straight out of the 20th century."

"Time doesn't mean shit on this island!" The woman said, leaning against the stepladder, and burst into manic laughter. "So did time abandon the island, or did the island abandon time? That is the question. Hah! It's not like the island's got a mind of its own. It's ridiculous! And time? Who's that? If I see him on the street, I'll end up saying, 'Hey, it's time'. Heehahahahaha!"

"Who the hell laughs that hard at their own joke? Seriously..."

The woman was doubled over on the ground, laughing her head off.

The man she had called 'Kuzu' shook his head.

But the screen reflected the smile that soon rose to his face. And beyond that, the interior of the ruined shopping mall and the endlessly wide ocean beyond the gaps in the wall.

This was neither the mainland nor the island.

It was Japan, yet not.

It was neither land nor sea.

The longest bridge in the world, spanning Sado Island and Niigata.

And the nameless artificial island that stood in the very middle of that bridge

—

What would the screen display here, at the crossroads of many destinies?
And what would the broadcasts show the people?

Images flashed to life on the screen, the future uncertain.

To display the fates of some, and to control the fates of others.



ワンワン
第一話 『犬vs犬』

Episode 1: Dog vs. Dog

"You're Hayato Inui?"

When the young man found himself facing down a group of men in black suits, he sighed.

"No. Seriously...what is up with today? You have any idea how crazy it's been? Everywhere I go, people keep asking if I'm him."

The young man ran his fingers through his multicolored hair, irritated.

"Look. I lost a bet and ended up doing my hair the same as Mr. Inui. What the hell? Everyone knows what he looks like, so why is everyone accusing me?" He spat.

The men in black exchanged glances.

"...We'll decide whether you're the real deal or not. Consider yourself unlucky. You're coming with us."

"...What? Hey, if I follow you without a fuss and you find out I'm not the guy...you're not gonna say 'we've got no business with you' and go BANG on me, are you?"

"Better than getting pumped full of lead here and now."

"Whoa, wait. All right. I'll go with..."

The panicked young man glanced over the men's shoulders, then, and suddenly raised his voice.

"Ah! Perfect timing, Mr. Inui!"

"?!"

The men turned reflexively.

But all they saw was a wall with loud graffiti that read 'made you look'.

A second later, a smirk rose to the young man's lips.

"You gotta help me...prove I'm not the one!"

The men in black tried to turn, sensing something terrible behind them, but the distinctive noise sounded before they could.

They were clear, crisp gunshots. But what the gunshots meant depended entirely on whether you were the one holding the gun or the one on the receiving end.

"So that was lesson one on Hayato Inui's face. Tell whoever you're working for, if you manage to make it back alive."

The voice clad in gunsmoke guffawed and shut the door.

"Heh. So now they're making their move."

With the groans of the men in the building behind him, the young man snickered under his breath.

"This is getting interesting."



The men with black cloths over their faces surrounded the woman without a word.

It was an easy situation to understand. A group of thugs preying on a woman in the dark.

"Who are you?" The woman asked nervously. One of the men finally spoke.

"...I hear you're quite the vixen."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The men, numbering at about a dozen, slowly drew closer to the woman with excitement in their eyes.

"She's one of the execs from the Western District criminals, right? What's she doing alone?"

"You think we got the wrong person?" "Doesn't matter. No normal person would be on this island to begin with."

"Can't believe our luck. Talk about an awesome catch."

"The rainbow son of a bitch got us good, but things are finally looking up."

Dim shadows were cast all around them, lit only by a fading fluorescent light.

The woman in the white *qipao* took a step back.

"Are you...here to kill me?"

The men panted and grinned.

"Kill you? No, no. We're just here to get rid of pests like you."

The woman smiled, then, an icy look rising to her eyes.

"Aha. So you're not part of some impish assassination plot by Gitarin."

"...?"

"Then I have no obligation to play along."

The woman's attitude changed in an instant. The men stopped without even thinking.

Had they failed to let sleeping dogs lie, they wondered. And—

"Pierce them."

It was an unusual command, the men thought, and half of them lost their lives.

Not by any magic or superhuman powers.

It was pure realism. The reality of lead bullets being driven into their heads.

"Huh...?"

The man who had referred to a rainbow earlier froze.

As if on cue, bullets flew again—

He alone was left with holes in his leg, the rest falling to the ground with blood spewing from their heads or hearts.

"Ah...grk...GAAAAAAAHHH!"

The shock delayed the agony, but it only spared him for a moment. He was overwhelmed by the pain running down his spine.

Though only his legs had been shot, it felt as though everything from his fingertips to his eyeballs and even every strand of hair on his head were screaming. The pain, in conjunction with his destroyed muscles, left the man to fall helplessly to the ground.

A figure appeared before him.

A young man in a black suit with a brown trenchcoat over it, and a gentle countenance.

The young man placed his foot on the thug's pinky finger and put down all his weight, as though trying to crush it.

The man's finger made an unpleasant noise, and a long shape with a white core, wrapped in skin, tore in a grotesque shape underfoot.

"AAAAAARGH! Hah...GAAAAAAAHHH!"

The chords of agony from his finger and his legs destroyed any sense of reason left in him.

But the young man would not even allow the thug to faint, pulling off his mask and grabbing the bearded man by the ears. He hissed in a voice so cold it seemed to freeze the air.

"The rainbow bastard."

A hint of emotion flickered in the young man's dark eyes. The emotion was such a complicated one that even he himself could not describe it fully.

"Details."

The woman in the *qipao* ordered a group of suit-clad men who came later to clean up the corpses. Then she spoke stoically to the young man.

"The elder was right. The mad dog is involved somehow."

"Yeah."

Like a shadow given form, he neither approached nor drew away from the woman.

Remembering a certain face in his memories, the young man clenched his teeth.

"We might have gotten ourselves into another mess."



It was a time when children born in the 21st century were growing into adulthood, one after another.

What hopes—or hopeless dreams—did their parents' generation have of the future 20 years ahead?

In 2021, the orbital elevator remained a dream, and flying cars existed but were not popularized. Technology evolved internally, however, with rapid developments in computing and communication technology. People's lives simply changed in step with the new developments.

And just as many people expected—and just as many people did not even need to expect—

Those typically known as 'villains' continued to infest the world.

<Ah-ah-ah—Aaahh... Testing... You hear me? Is everybody hearing this?
Answer if you can! But since nobody else's got a mic, I'd never hear you

anyway! Tch. Forget the *test*, I seriously can't tell if the whole island's hearing this! Am I going stupid here?! Stupid! Stuuuuuuupid!
STUUUUUUUUUPID! ...Hic. ...Which is why today's Buruburu Airwaves is gonna be extra cranky! This program has been brought to you by the following sponsorbitches! So here's what's up. I know you all've seen the Buruburu TV I installed in front of the Grand Mall fountain. If you haven't, you've got a one-way ticket to seppukuland, you outlander, you! Push out a kidney or two and donate it to a sick kid. Got that? FYI, I'm not crying, I swear!>

The DJ's irritating voice chattered across the island without rhyme or tempo that afternoon.

But the islanders seemed to be used to the noise; they muttered that it was better than the noise of living under bridges, and accepted it as part of their lives.

The city was surrounded by water.

It was cut off from Japanese society, but was nonetheless a part of Japan.

Supposedly, those cast away from society gathered in that city.

And on the island known as a modern-day Kowloon Walled City to the people of the mainland, yet another gossip-worthy incident was unfolding.

At the docks on the south side of the island.

Warehouses stockpiled with foodstuffs and supplies lined the path. And about a dozen men were standing there, surrounding two figures kneeling on the ground.

There was no one else there; the group must have cut off entry to the area.

"The package."

At the center of the majority group was a rugged man; he clearly did no legitimate work, and there was an uncharacteristic smile on his face.

"No, well—"

Psh. There was a muffled noise and a hole was blown through one of the kneeling men's thighs.

"Gah! Urk! Aaaaaagh! Hah! Uaaaargh!"

The rugged man never stopped grinning, as though there was no one squirming on the ground before him. In his hand was a small handgun equipped with a silencer, smoke rising from the muzzle.

"Look, I've got no patience for shits who take it slow. It's a waste of my time. 'S-sorry, boss...we messed up...just kidding! We pulled it off! Surprise!' ain't gonna work with me. Capisce?" He threatened, snickering. "You gotta be *considerate*. Think about how much trouble I took to get all the way to this godforsaken island for the exchange."

"N-no! No! It's not my fault! This island's not normal! There's goddamned monsters on the loose! We *all* messed up! Just cause there's no cops around doesn't mean we're in the clear to—"

Psh. Psh. Psh.

Several dampened noises later, the man with the hole in his leg stopped screaming.

The man who saw his partner lying on the ground, blood spewing from his chest and head, could do nothing but gape in silence.

Finally, the grinning man smirked and loaded his gun.

"See, I'm actually a magician. I can turn back time."

He glanced at the men behind him.

One of the goons responded, walking up to the side of the kneeling man—then, unlike the dead man, the goon knelt opposite the surviving one.

"Let's take this from the top. Hm. Which one did I shoot last time? The one on the right?"

"...Ah... Grk..."

"I remember. I aimed at the one on the right," the rugged man said slowly, "now, the package."

"H-h-he has it! Not us! He took it! I swear!"

The kneeling man could practically feel the bullet piercing his thigh. So he squealed without a second thought.

"Th-the bastard with rainbow hair! He has the package!"

"...Rainbow hair?"

"H-he said he was...Inui! Hayato Inui! Son of a bitch showed up outta nowhere yesterday and told us to hand it over! Fuck! I thought the package was supposed to be a secret! We're the only ones who're supposed to know 'bout it!"

The kneeling man screamed in the face of death. The rugged man thought for a moment, then lowered his gun.

"Where is he?"

"H-he's supposed to be in the Pits or the East or something! The Eastern District goons might know. B-but you don't have to go that far! I-I know his face! I can—"

Psh. Psh.

Two shots. Two bullets truck the man, one in each leg.

"AAAAARGH! GAAAAAH!"

"I don't think rainbow hair's in fashion these days. We've got enough to go on."

The rugged man ignored his victim's screams and gave orders to his men.

"Call in as many as possible and hunt down that Inui bitch."

"But sir, the Ei family and organizations from many other countries control this island..." One of the subordinates advised, but the rugged man snorted.

"There's no point stirring crap with the gangs here. If we were yakuza, we'd follow the rules. But we're a *charity*."

"Right." The subordinate nodded, and glanced down at the screaming man.
"What do we do with him?"

"I don't feel like wasting any more bullets."

Between his screams, the man on the ground reached for hope amidst the agonizing pain—

But in only three seconds, the light of hope turned into despair.

"Tch. What a pain. Toss him in the ocean."



The Western District. The top floor of the Grand Ibis Hotel.

"Now, my brethren. Let us begin."

In fluent Chinese, the young man at the head of the table announced the beginning of the meal.

There was an unfortunate hotel in the Western District that had been abandoned not long after being fully furnished. It was the Grand Ibis Hotel, which now acted as the massive fortress of the organization that controlled the Western District.

The top floor was originally intended to be a five-star Chinese restaurant.

The decor and the furnishings, and even the original role of the space had been fully preserved.

But the only patrons the restaurant received were those affiliated with the Western District.

Once more, those gathered for the banquet teetered on the verge of a battle of wits.

"...The island grows tumultuous of late."

Sparking the conversation was the tall man who opened the banquet.

He seemed to be about 30 years of age.

The tattoo on his cheek and his sharpened gaze—icy enough to kill—made the man seem unapproachable.

"Taifei. Your report."

"Munch...mhm."

The reply came from a rotund man chewing on a Chinese meatball, who looked rather like a meatball himself.

He was still young, but his hair was thinning and had left behind only the sides and the back of his head still covered.

The man called Taifei busied his hands with food as he began to explain.

"Mhm. We've had an upswing in violent incidents on the island recently. Shootings, stabbings, things like that. We have over 20 dead that we know of. And as far as we know, the victims have nothing in common. Although you could say a large chunk of them were pretty heinous. Munch... The strangest thing here is that we haven't caught any of the culprits. It doesn't look like there's a lone killer like Yakumo Amagiri on the loose, either. On another note, we might owe it to Kuzuhara's team that there haven't been as many deaths here compared to the East or the Pits. ...Munch..."

"So the victims were villains. Is someone playing vigilante on our island, I wonder?" Joked a young woman with black hair and blue eyes. She took a sip of tea and said her brother, the tattooed man, "and what is Ei Daren's position on the matter?"

"We do not yet have enough information to know if we should act on the matter," said the man at the head of the table. His sister—Yili Ei—smiled.

"If we need more information, why not consult with the detective you're so fond of?"

"Foolishness. We're not searching for a lost dog, Yili."

"So you're not denying the fact that you're fond of the detective," Yili chuckled. Some at the table tensed, and the older members sighed.

But her brother Lihuang Ei—the man who ruled the Western District—simply gave a wry grin and ignored her jab.

"Does no one have any information about this case?"

That was when an old bald man with a grand beard raised his hand and quietly spoke.

"Quite a few unfamiliar faces have entered the island."

"Hm? It's rather unusual to hear that you are concerned about such things, Elder."

The old man stroked his beard and continued plainly.

"It seems the gaudy dog of the East caused a commotion quite recently. His foes were men from the mainland."

"Hm. But that seems to be nothing unusual, Elder. Are you certain about this?"

"The deaths have grown fewer in number since he began to battle the mainland men three days ago."

Lihuang nodded and turned to Taifei.

Taifei understood. He recited the information Lihuang needed without pausing from his meal.

"Munch... Yeah. Yesterday and the day before were pretty much peaceful. There was a murder near our red-light district, but Lilei knew who did it and said she'd take care of it. She was bent on catching this one—apparently the victim was an adorable friend of hers. I almost feel sorry for the killer. ... Munch... But that's definitely worth looking into. Anyway, can I get seconds of the chili sauce prawns?"

"...Ask the chef."

No matter the time or place, the organization's head of intelligence maintained his laid-back attitude. Lihuang sighed and bowed to the elder.

"I am grateful for your wise counsel, Elder."

"Not at all, my boy. There's not much else I can do at this age," the old man smiled, taking a sip of tea. Then he said no more.

"In any case, we must remain vigilant. It would be truly shameful if one of those gathered here today were to lose their life."

The blue-eyed woman was the only one to respond.

"If any of us were so frail, we'd have already been killed by another organization...or by our own brethren."

Yili was absolutely correct.

In the past, countless organizations had feuded and warred on the island. There were now only two organizations of importance left, but many on the mainland and overseas still had their eyes on the city.

But the outside world was not the only source of danger.

Even within organizations were warring factions. One wrong move, and the next thing served up on the round table could be one's lost assets and rights, or even one's life.

That was why the Western District's executives obtained all kinds of power to protect themselves.

And that night, Yili wielded her power in full force.

It was only a few hours after the banquet that she was attacked on her way down to the Pits.

Of course, her attackers' blood and brains were scattered everywhere in a matter of seconds.

All at the hands of a certain man who acted as her shield and spear.



The Eastern District Casino. The VIP room.

"If one moves, so does the other. That's how it works with them."

The dogs were not rabid, but reflected.

It was the Eastern District's most eccentric and most powerful man who made that observation.

"So no matter how much time passes, they'll never amount to anything more than dogs."

There was a large casino built on the island.

And sitting on a long sofa inside the casino's exclusive VIP room was Levert Lowe Sturbaiken Gitarin Chloroclad Kagenomiya the 666th, wearing a smile.

"If one barks, so does the other. If one shuts up, the other does too. And if one dies, the other one dies as well. It's not hard to understand, is it?"
Gitarin snickered, tilting his wineglass.

"But the important thing here's that we're not talking about two dogs. This is a dog and his reflection in the mirror. One's not reacting to the other. But don't get pedantic and tell me that the real dog's faster because the reflection reacts at the speed of light, all right? There's no point to that line of thought, since people can't detect something that quick..."

Perhaps he was already drunk. Gitarin played with the empty wineglass in his hand. It almost looked like he was enjoying the sensation of the glass against his fingers.

He began to talk faster—it seemed Gitarin enjoyed discussing the dogs.

"Hayato Inui and Seiichi Kugi. Ironically, both their names have characters meaning 'dog' in them. So the island basically treats them like dogs. Inui the 'mad dog' or 'wild dog'. Kugi the 'witch's dog' or 'loyal hound'."

Hayato Inui.

Seiichi Kugi.

Only the newest arrivals to the island were ignorant of those names.

But not many knew that the two men had exchanged gunfire countless times.

Of course, some had heard the rumors.

Gitarin placed his glass on the baccarat table before him and tapped his finger on the edge of the green table.

"We call them dogs like a joke, but you should never look down on dogs. Truly angry dogs can maul a man to death with ease."

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap tap. Tap. Tap tap tap.

The taps of his fingers gradually rode a rhythm on the table, and Gitarin's tone sped up.

"Dogs of the government, dogs of the police, and dogs of vixens. Descriptors aside, those are the most dangerous people of them all."

Tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap tap.

"People use the term 'dog' to refer to someone they look down on. But that's not entirely a correct usage of the word."

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap tap tap—

"See, dogs aren't robots. They have what you call an 'ego'. They chose to become dogs in order to live out their convictions. People who simply follow others without any clear convictions are, in other words, less than dogs. Though once artificial intelligence enters the spotlight things might be different, those mindless followers are either robots or trash. Yes. Trash like

me—the organization leader who's getting drunk before the sun's gone down!"

The drumming of his finger stopped.

With a laugh, Gitarin clapped his hands.

"In any event, those two dogs are true to themselves until the very end. Which is why it bothers them so much to see someone so alike. I suppose you could call this a territorial dispute...although in this case, we're not talking physical territory so much as emotional. ...Or does that sound too trite?"

Spreading his arms wide, Gitarin finally concluded his spiel, looking as though he was the one who most enjoyed the speech.

"In other words, they're gravitating towards each other because of their own convictions. Although they'd probably claim it's something like fate."



Several hours later, somewhere on the island.

"Say, you believe in fate?" Asked the rainbow-haired man. The black-haired younger man responded with icy silence.

The center of the island was crowded with buildings abandoned in every stage of construction.

Two figures were staring each other down before one particularly tall building.

One was the walking definition of 'gaudy'.

He had dyed his hair in the colors of the rainbow, had safety pins stuck in his ears, and was wearing differently-colored contact lenses in each eye in an outlandish imitation of heterochromia.

The black-haired man was not so eye-catching. His brown coat and the suit he wore underneath gave him a very calm air.

But there was a hint of annoyance in his face, and his eyes were brimming with loathing.

Nonchalantly receiving the hatred from Seiichi Kugi, Hayato Inui guffawed and spread his arms.

"Chill out, pal. I'm not here to kill you today. I wasn't even planning to see you—what the hell happened?"

For some reason, people were scattered all around them.

Each of the goons was holding a gun and lying on the ground. Some seemed to be dead.

Inui looked down at one man groaning on the ground before him and put on a cynical grin.

"Mr. Kuzuhara'd lose his shit if he saw this. At us, too, since we shot back. He doesn't take the self-defense plea if guns're involved on your end," he snickered.

In Inui's hand was a gun with flashy alterations. Kugi was holding a pair of small handguns.

"I've been wondering—isn't dual-wielding a pain in the ass?"

Kugi was silent.

"It looks kickass so I tried it out before. But the recoil was killer and aiming was pretty much impossible, so I gave up. Then I saw how you were doing it, and it all made sense! Yeah. You don't need to aim properly when you're lunging into someone's gut before you shoot them." Inui nodded to himself, and turned to Kugi. "So here's a suggestion! There's this Christian Bale flick called 'Equilibrium' with some slick fighting style called 'gun kata'. Basically a mix of guns and martial arts. Swear to god, you've got potential! Let's give it a shot, no pun intended! Life's all about challenges!"

It almost sounded like a threat, but the childish glint in Inui's eye proved that he was completely serious.

And unusually enough, Kugi played along this time.

"Sorry, but the only Christian Bale movies I watched were the Batman series."

"Aha. Man, I still get shivers when I think about the goddamned Joker! Used to scare the shit outta me when I was a kid, but now he's one of my favorite role models! Seriously!"

With a laugh, Inui waved his gun and began to walk.

"Anyway, what the hell just happened here?"

Slowly closing the distance to Kugi, he desperately clung to the cooling atmosphere.

"Look, it's not like we met up to fight this time. This has got to be fate. Don't you think?"

Kugi's answer was simple.

"The fate of your death, you mean?"

Without a second thought, he took aim at Inui.

But instead of dodging, Inui stopped and grinned.

"Heh. That's enough. You're supposed to be digging for info, not killing me."

"If I need info, the only things I need functional is your mouth, your heart, and your brain."

"You might get a functioning brain, but not an actual mind," Inui muttered, trying to read his foe's bloodlust.

He slowly fingered his gun, looking for all the world fearless in the face of death, but he did not take aim.

He knew that one wrong move, and Kugi would open fire. And if Kugi was trying to kill him as he usually did, he would have long ago pulled the trigger.

Time seemed to stop around them.



Even the slightest of changes—from the sound of the wind to a subdued gulp—could become a signal for them to open fire.

They both waited for that change, but did not even think about bringing it about themselves.

Each knew that, if his first shot was not lethal, he would be the one to die.

The tension was palpable, like when two swordsmen stood within range of one another.

As they waited for the signal, all kinds of emotions ran through the air in the span of several seconds.

But the signal did not result in an exchange of bullets.

That was how unusual the signal was.

The dogs stood close enough that they could leap over to the other with ease.

The signal was a shoe falling between them.

The shoe fell out of nowhere and hit the ground, bouncing back up, and both men reflexively pulled the trigger—

—and fired.

But the bullets did not reach either of them.

Something followed the shoe, falling into the line of fire.

The bullets were driven into the mass, their arcs swerving wildly as they escaped the object and disappeared into the distance.

What had fallen between the dogs?

It was a bloodied man, his body twisted in unnatural directions.

What had happened to the two dogs?

And what would happen now?

Things had begun a little earlier, before the showdown under the building.

-Continued in Episode 3-

スヤスヤ

第二話『眠＝死』



Episode 2: Sleep=Death

~My Heart-Pounding Nap Diary~

_____ th, 2021.

I write diary. It is happiness. He said.

Nap friend Killer Ghoul. He said.

My face is bored. He said.

Sleep is happy. I said.

But he said.

Sleep is death. Enjoy not-sleep. He said. Or it is loss. He said.

I am adorable. He said. If I do not speak. I will make many friends. Enjoy not-sleep. He said.

I am adorable. He said.

I am happy.

But I said. Dream is happy. Many friends in dream.

Then he gave me. This notebook.

Heart-Pounding. It says. Every page.

If I write diary. I know what is dream. What is real. I am happy.
He said.

I learn more Japanese. He said.

He is Killer Ghoul. But a good ghoul.

If he is shorter. He is adorable. If he is shorter. I hug. Hug.

I write happy things.

Morning. It is warm. It is cozy. I sleep. Happy.

Day. It is warm. It is cozy. I sleep. Happy.

I sleep now. Happy. Hug.

'Sleeping Beauty'.

That was the nickname of a girl in the Western District.

To most, the idea of a girl asleep in the concrete jungle evoked the image of a child dying of illness or rendered comatose in an accident.

But Sleeping Beauty had been put to sleep by the will of others.

In a world of darkness she slept. For days, months, years.

She was still young then.

After losing her mother, the girl spent years in pitch-black darkness.

She had no way of escaping, and no knowledge of why this was happening to her.

The most profound image of light in her memories was the scene she saw in the moments before the darkness.

A brilliant splash of gold.

She knew it was her mother.

But why wouldn't her mother move? Why wouldn't she open her eyes, even though it was daytime?

"All done saying goodbye now?"

Men with deep voices spoke quickly in Mandarin behind her.

"Poor thing. We'll let you keep your life."

"Not to worry, Lilei. Sleep."

"Yili is known to the public, but not even Ei Daren knows of your existence."

"We cannot leave any seeds of conflict behind."

"All you need to do is sleep."

"Until the day your life ends, or something should happen to Yili and we come to need you."

"Have no hope for the future. You were even given the chance to witness your mother's death—let that be the light of the past in your life."

"For you will never see light again."

Then, the girl was literally granted a world without light.

A strange chemical had been applied to her eyelids and talismans had been pasted over them.

That simple act plunged her into darkness.

At some point, the men began to call the girl, not by name, but by a sort of codename—Sleeping Beauty.

Without even hope for true love's kiss to finally bring her to the light, the girl was left in an artificial world of darkness.



Ten years later. Somewhere on the artificial island on the Etsusa Bridge.

The island was disgusting.

Without thinking, I cringed at the scent of rust.

The first thing I understood after coming here was the hopeless fact that I had fallen very, very far.

The Etsusa Bridge—the longest bridge in the world, spanning Sado island and Niigata.

And the city-sized artificial island that stood in the very middle of that bridge.

People said that the island, several times the size of the ones in Tokyo Bay, was the pinnacle of Japanese technology and capital. But now it was just a dump.

After all, development on the island stopped the moment the island was connected to the mainland.

In spite of the money, technology, and manpower poured into the poor artificial island, it was cast aside.

And the only people who gathered there were people without a future. People like me.

Aha. A modern-day Kowloon Walled City.

It was a gathering of people with nowhere to go, but so long as you weren't suicidal you had to survive somehow. So the outcasts who settled here came up with rules at some point and created a society of sorts, apparently.

Society and order. Words that were very far removed indeed from this island.

Rules were only rules, not laws.

In the end, I'd fallen into a dump.

That alone I knew for certain.

It had been only three hours since I arrived.

I thought I was ready.

A week's worth of rations.

A stun gun and pepper spray for self-defense.

Knowing it was dangerous here, I'd stuffed 10,000-yen bills into my shoes, too.

And now...I was wandering the island, barefoot.

Anyone could come up with those contingencies.

And those contingencies failed me against the island's veteran criminals.

In the blink of an eye, I lost everything I had. I was struck by the urge to return to Japan.

Technically, the island was Japan too. But that was nearly an impossible statement to believe at this point.

Forget Japan—was this even real?

It was a robber's den, just like the ones I saw in movies. Even now, with empty pockets and chilly feet, I couldn't even tell if I was awake.

But I couldn't go back now.

There was nowhere left for me on the other side.

I wandered hopelessly around the island.

I'd gathered info on the island ahead of time, but the first thing the pickpocket took was the cell phone with all that information.

It was probably one of the kids who crowded around me first, asking for money.

I couldn't even trust children. What kind of hellhole was this?

...Then again, you could barely trust kids that age on the mainland.

This island wasn't an anomaly. This entire world was crazy.

And that's how I ended up on this island. Fuck.

I was walking for a while when I heard a clamor.

I thought it was a fight, but it turned out that a group of children were cheering.

One of them might have stolen my phone, I thought, and headed over—and found an unusual scene.

I realized I'd stepped into a shopping mall at some point. This must have been the central hall or the entrance. There was a fountain in the middle and the lights from outside were spilling into the building.

Hanging on one pillar by the fountain was a 40-inch screen. It was about 10 years old, and weighed only a kilogram in spite of its size.

But even that was old news on the mainland—screens these days were closer to sheets of paper.

The crowd in front of the TV was composed mostly of kids, though shady adults were also watching from a slight distance.

The TV seemed to be showing a pro wrestling match.

...Did they show matches at this time of day?

But the wrestlers on the screen soon answered my question.

A blond wrestler grabbed a knife and mercilessly slashed the masked wrestler.

Blood spilled from the cut on the masked wrestler's arm.

The children cheered. There was no referee on the ring.

It was when I saw the faces of the people around the ring that I realized all this was taking place on the island, not the mainland.

The men who had mugged me when I was reeling from the loss of my cell phone. They were raising their voices, holding my money in their hands.

This was underground wrestling. The rest of the audience was also enraptured—I could hear things like 'Kill him!' or 'Carve him up!' over the speakers.

And the children in front of the TV cried out as they watched the masked wrestler.

"Oh no! Zhang's hurt!"

"It's just a scratch. Zhang can take it!" "Fight back!"

"Greatest!"

The injured wrestler must have been popular with the kids. Even through the screen I could tell he was quite tall.

A second later, the masked wrestler landed a kick on his opponent's knife-hand. The blond wrestler's wrist bent at an odd angle.

It was nauseating. I tried to look away, but the masked wrestler landed a drop-kick before I could and sent his opponent flying out of the ring.

The children cheered in unison, but I could not watch anymore.

Cheering at something so violent? These kids were not normal.

I worried for all their futures.

I was just about to leave that place, when I noticed something unusual among the children.

It drew my gaze without my knowing—

And I spotted a splash of pristine white.

From the Chinese dress coat over her to her skin and the large flowers in her hair. It was all white, so far removed from this dump of an island.

She was probably in her mid-teens.

With her slender arms the girl in white was hugging the boy in front of her.

I thought the boy, about five years younger than her, might be her brother. But he was blushing red as a tomato and trying to squirm out of her embrace.

"Hey, let me go. You're embarrassing me..."

The back of his head was buried in her surprisingly developed breasts. The boy was desperately trying to escape.

But the girl showed no sign of wanting to let go.

"You squirming. It is adorable. Hug."

She mumbled in strangely accented Japanese and placed her chin on the boy's head.

The girl's eyes were half-shut. The dark circles under her eyes made her look almost sickly.

She was cute.

I trembled.

I was not a pedophile. My taste in women was normal.

This wasn't sexual attraction. How could I express it? ...It was something like looking at a sculpture for the very first time at an art gallery.

She looked so sickly on this mess of an island. And so she was beautiful.

She was the color white. She was separate from the world. And if this island was separate from the real world, maybe she was a fantasy from reality.

She didn't smile. She didn't frown.

A pure, untainted soul that has erased its own expressions...

Was I getting too poetic?

I hadn't even spoken to her. Why was I becoming so obsessed?

Why was I so drawn to her?

Because she reminded me of someone.

But I couldn't remember who.

And, unable to find an answer, I found myself channeling my inner adolescent to say—

—I think I must have seen an angel.

~My Heart-Pounding Nap Diary~

_____ th, 2021.

Today, pro wrestling. In front of TV. In front of fountain.

Lots of children. Children around TV.

It is crowded. It is crowded.

Inside TV. Eastern man flying kick. Everyone cheer.

Hurray. Hurray. Yay.

It is adorable. Hug.

I hugged boys. I hugged girls. Soft. Warm. Adorable.

Boy is shy. Stop. He said.

It is adorable. I hug him more. It is adorable.

There is strange man. Looking at me.

Adult. Not adorable.

But it is like always.

He attack me. I hit with pipe.

Lead pipe. Led lead led lead.

I mix up spelling. Mr. Kugi teach me.

How to write. Lead pipe. Mr. Kugi is confused.

Mr. Kugi. Elder Sister's bodyguard. Maybe boyfriend.

He is adult. But he is adorable.

But I hug him. Elder Sister is mad.

She does not say. But she look away.

It is jealous. I think. Elder Sister is adorable.

At TV.

Strange adult. Gone.

But I went home. Another man talk to me.

He tried to touch me.

He took off clothes.

He took off pants. Shake.

Not adorable. Beat him with pipe. Everywhere.

Man screamed. Western people dragged him away.

Guard Team came. Mr. Kuzuhara came. It is cool.

"It's dangerous. Don't come out. At night." They said.

Mr. Kuzuhara knows. I am assassin.

"Old man unlucky." Everyone said. Even Elder Brother.

Mr. Kuzuhara. Worried for me.

Mr. Kuzuhara. Treats me like girl.

He is good person. I think.

I wish he is adorable.

But radio woman said. Kuzuhara is adorable.

I do not understand. It is hard.

Now I sleep. Good night. Zzz...

Ten years ago, somewhere on the artificial island.

Talismans had suddenly been placed on the girl's eyes and she was left to live in darkness.

A female helper was assigned to help her with meals, baths, and the bathroom, but eventually the girl was able to take care of herself.

At times, the helper peeled off the talismans and cleaned her face.

That was probably to keep her eyelids from developing gangrene, but the talismans were quickly reapplied after each treatment.

The talismans almost gave off the air of mysticism and magic, but the only thing sealed in her girl's eyes was the perfectly realistic power known as 'influence'.

It seemed the color of her eyes meant something very important to the men.

They could not blind her, for they might someday have a use for her. But they could not let the color of her eyes be exposed to just anyone.

That was why they had sealed her eyes shut.

It was like killing two birds with one stone. Her freedom had been taken with ease, and her eyes were concealed from the world.

By logical standards, it was an outrageous act.

But logical standards did not apply on this island.

And those outrageous restraints deprived the girl of light.

Perhaps, at first, she had cried out in fear.

Perhaps the little girl had anguished and despaired at the world.

But no one knew if she had anymore.

Because anyone who was connected to the girl 10 years ago was by now fish food.



Nine years ago.

"Here...I'll get you out of here."

It had been about a year since the girl was locked away in the dark.

The helper's warm voice filled her ears.

The voice was brimming with sympathy and the hope that her desires would be heard.

"I've fallen as far as I could now. But an adorable girl like you shouldn't be here."

From the voice, the helper seemed to be around the same age as the girl's mother.

But those words came as a shock to her.

The helper had never once spoken to the girl before, and she had never answered any of her questions. The woman's voice truly had come out of nowhere.

"—Ah—...? ...———..."

The girl hadn't used her voice in over half a year. She realized that she could not speak properly.

No matter how much she tried, she could not produce a voice.

But the woman seemed to understand, constantly speaking to her.

She kept a voice playing in the darkness that was the girl's world.

"I hope you'll be free in our stead," said the helper, gently taking her hand.

She probably didn't peel off the talismans because she knew that sudden exposure to light might damage the girl's eyesight.

"I have a daughter around your age, a little younger than you."

With her hand around the girl's, the woman led her somewhere.

"I watched over you because I at least wanted to free my little girl, but those people never intended to let either of us go in the first place. But you're different...if you could meet Master Lihuang...be free...free...we're, done, but, yes. Adorable children should be happy. But, you're adorable, but my daughter too. Yes. If an adorable girl like you is happy, my daughter will too..."

The woman mumbled almost maniacally as she led the girl outside.

The confused girl, meanwhile, wracked her brains in the darkness.

She had almost given up on conversation by then.

But she now had hope for seeing the outside world again.

She even began to fantasize that her mother was still alive.

The girl's mind—sharpened to the point of utter clarity—and her honed hearing clung to each and every word out of the woman's mouth. As though desperately craving information, the girl carved the words into her mind and desperately tried to decipher them.

But she was too young.

Before the girl could even determine if the woman was in her right mind, the flow of information came to a sudden halt.

The second the girl thought of her mother and reached out for the light of hope, the minutes-long escape was stopped in its tracks.

There was a noise, followed by a splatter.

"Agh."

The woman's voice.

It sounded more like an airy gasp than a word.

Something warm splashed onto the girl's face. She smelled metal.

"She must have lost her mind. Can't believe she'd try to escape with her."

"This is getting ridiculous. Should we just get rid of the girl? We have no idea if we'll ever get to use her."

"No. Taifei suspects something. If he's gotten wind of this, she could be a valuable card. We can't dispose of her now."

"We'll just have to hope her sister dies of illness. It all depends on her."

The girl could hear the men.

The voices of the men who had sealed her eyes a year earlier.

She still did not understand them.

The men patted her on the head and whispered—gently but threateningly.

"You were just having a bad dream. Now, go back to sleep."



Nine years later. Somewhere on the island.

It had been a week since I came to the island.

Frankly, I was impressed I managed to get this far.

I was held up when I didn't have a single coin on me. I almost got seduced out of whatever I had left. I was inspected by some volunteer police force. I could say with confidence that I knew the true definition of misery.

The volunteer police were apparently on edge because there had been some murders and disappearances recently. Was that supposed to be news here? I thought murder was commonplace on this island.

Meanwhile, I slowly figured out how to get by and managed to secure myself some time.

At first I'd worried about how I would get food. But I soon found out that I could buy that stuff at the restaurants and stores in the Western District underground, provided I had money.

I wondered how they got a hold of fresh pork, ham and things like that. It turned out there were middlemen who regularly shipped foodstuffs to the island every day.

It was tax evasion and a lot of other illegal things in one bundle, but it was not necessarily cross-border smuggling so they were probably not going to get arrested. The middlemen probably had it rough already, competing for those lucrative jobs.

I was left broke on day one, but I helped carry some of those smuggled goods at the docks and got some pay.

It was less than minimum wage by mainland standards—not even pocket money—but it felt for all the world like a pile of treasure to me. Which was natural, as it was enough to fill my belly on the island.

I always assumed the island would be a lawless stone-age world where the strongest preyed on the weak, but apparently there was some semblance of society here.

...

Society.

At that point, I remembered my past.

How had I come all this way?

I was just trying to abide by the rules of society.

I wasn't trying to become a paragon of justice or anything.

I just wanted to be someone who could hold his head high.

That was how I ended up here.

I believed I did the right thing.

By the rules of society, what I did was right.

But apparently that went against the customs of the company I worked at.

There were countless awful injustices surrounding the company.

It was one of the country's top corporations. And one filled to the brim with corruption.

I expected I'd be ostracized at work.

I expected I'd be despised.

But what I did was right. What was there to fear?

All I did was throw a stone.

I believed that throwing one stone into a pond would naturally create ripples that spread into its every corner.

The courage to act first is very important.

That was what I thought. So what was I doing here on this island?

Thanks to pressure from a politician, the press never publicized the article.

If I'd known that would happen, I'd have just posted it on the internet. At the time I didn't trust the net, so I had used it as little as necessary. I sent the evidence by email to the police, but I was worried that the evidence might be swept under the rug if I released it publicly.

When I realized that something powerful was at work, I began to wonder if I should post the evidence on the internet after all. But the company was quick. The moment the police launched an investigation, they concealed the evidence completely and even had me framed for embezzlement and got me arrested.

The company crashed over me like a fearsome wave.

I was taken by surprise. I had to do everything in my power to protect myself. And while I was called to the police station, a burglar snuck into my house and swiped my computer and all the evidence I had collected. Although the evidence wouldn't have changed a thing anyway.

In the end, the stone I threw never got to create ripples in the pond—it was destroyed before it hit the water.

In the span of two weeks, I understood—to my horror—that in this world existed things that no one person could resist.

Soon, I was fired—

"Hey, Mister. Never seen you around before."

The children's voices quickly dragged me into reality.

'Iizuka's Restaurant' was written in marker on the wall. In front of me was the cheapest item on the menu, *tsukudani* rice topped with dried seaweed. I must have zoned out for a while.

All kinds of businesses lined the so-called Western District underground.

From unlicensed doctors to restaurants like this one, general stores, and barbershops, it was a small shopping mall and a food vendor alley mixed into one.

After my first payday, I began to frequent this restaurant—the cheapest in the area. Although it mostly served snack items, like yakisoba and okonomiyaki. The employee cafeteria back at the company was much better

—

No. I refused to think about the company anymore.

The restaurant was brimming with energy in spite of the drab interior. And I was surrounded by walking bundles of energy—the children of the owner.

"It's good, right?"

"We added a bunch of stuff, you know!"

"Our special ingredients!"

"Like turmeric!"

"And vitamin supplements!"

"Lots of supplements!"

"So if we sold this at regular price, we would never break even!"

"So could you spare us poor kids a tip— Ow!" "Oh!" "Gah!" "Urgh!" "Wah!"
"..."

The owner—the woman who seemed to be the half-dozen children's mother—brought the handle of her kitchen knife down on their heads, one after another. The children screamed in time like a piece of music.

"Rip off the customers all you want, but do *not* lie about the food here!"

"Hey! You're supposed to believe in your kids, Ma!"

"How could you doubt your own children?"

"Don't ignore us just because of our age!"

"Yeah!" "We're not lying! We really *do* add supplements when you're not—"

But the last child was cut off by a glint in the woman's eye.

"...If you did, next time I won't be using the blunt end."

The children went silent. They averted their gazes and began whistling innocently.

The woman sighed and marched back into the kitchen.

The children reminded me of the girl I'd seen last week.

It seemed like these kids had been born and raised on the island.

They didn't seem to be as bad as the ones who took my phone. If those kids were raised and influenced by the seedier part of the island, these kids here were probably influenced by the more benign part. If there was anything benign on this island to begin with, anyway.

But the girl seemed to have been influenced by neither.

Or maybe she was raised on something pure—however little of that was left on the island.

...

...?

Why was I thinking about her again?

I'd never even spoken to her. I just looked at her.

So why wouldn't she leave my mind?

It would be a crime, no two ways about it, if a man my age were to lay a hand on her.

But something was bugging me.

This really didn't seem to be romantic love. And it was not sexual attraction.

Why was her face etched into my memories?

I...I might have seen her before somewhere.

But I didn't remember when.

It might not have been her, specifically. But she still looked familiar.

Before I knew it, I was speaking to the children around me.

"Kids. Have any of you seen a girl with white flowers in her hair? She's a little older than you."

The kids exchanged glances.

"White flowers, huh."

"You think it's her?"

"Mister, you mean the Chinese girl with shadows under her eyes?"

"Oh yeah, she always looks so sleepy."

"She's got big boobies."

The children haphazardly listed off a series of features. I remembered the girl's appearance and noted that they seemed to match, so I nodded.

The children made strange faces and looked at me.

"You should stay away from her, Mister."

"N-no, that's not—"

I thought they had the wrong idea about me, so I tried to deny it.

But the children seemed to be thinking of something else.

"You'll die."

"...What?"

"She's really nice to us. She does stuff for us...like hot stuff."

"But she's gonna say you're not adorable. She won't even look at you."

"You'll end up a stain on a lead pipe if you tried to touch her."

Lead pipe. Way to take the conversation to a whole new level of terror.

"And she's someone important in the Western District."

"She's the former boss's lovechild."

I wasn't expecting a word like that.

"I guess she *is* from a whole other world."

The oldest of the children smirked, checked to see that his mother was in the kitchen, and whispered into my ear.

"But...I just might know where you could find her."

"..."

"But you're gonna have to perform a magic ritual to get the answer. All you have to do is make an offering of 500 yen to my wallet!"

The boy grinned greedily. And I was once again reminded:

I would never come to like this island.



The children led me to one of the many abandoned buildings on the island.

'Abandoned' was a misnomer in a way, since apparently it was never used. It wasn't furnished at all. The building was a pile of concrete walls and pillars home to mounds of junk.

I had been surprised to see how clean the island was.

When I asked around, I was told that each district was governed by an organization of sorts that took care of their respective areas. They had people clean communal bathrooms or collect food waste.

Apparently the most stable job on the island was running a bath business out of a hotel suite. But most people in that business were affiliated with the organizations controlling the island.

That aside, when I tried to step into the building—

—the children tugged at my clothes and shook their heads condescendingly.

"She's not in here, Mister. She's on the roof."

"?"

She took naps on the rooftop, they'd said.

So didn't that necessitate going into the building?

"This building's full of junk, Mister. You're not gonna get through," explained one of the boys.

"Then how do I get up there? Is there a ladder I can use?"

I glanced at the gap between this building and the next, slowly raising my head—

—and I spotted something red and white fluttering against the backdrop of the sky.

"...?"

For a moment, I thought it was her.

But I quickly realized my mistake.

The figure was a long-haired person, although their gender was unclear from this distance.

The figure seemed to be rhythmically spinning and twirling down—so quickly that I could not believe my eyes.

I would never be able to do something like that, even under the threat of death.

Acrophobia wasn't the issue. Just the thought of crossing from the rooftop to the scaffolding sent a chill down my spine.

As I shivered, the red-and-white figure descended low and made landing with ease.

"Ah! It's Yakumo!"

The children shrieked and bolted in every direction.

"H-hey!"

"Bye, Mister! Just keep waiting there and you'll see her eventually!"

"Try not to die!"

"Wh-what?! Hey! Hold it!"

I tried to stop them, but the children took off like frightened puppies and disappeared into the alleyways.

What the hell.

I had to know what I'd gotten myself into now. I turned to the figure.

And I found myself face-to-face with a young man.

"AGH!"

He wasn't standing up close, but he was still within an arm's reach.

I stepped back without thinking and scrutinized the man.

He dressed like what you'd get if you dumped a bucket of white paint on a rocker, but there was something eerie in his eyes.

It occurred to me that he was not normal.

So I decided to play nice.

"E-excuse me. Do you have some business with me?"

"That's my line," he said mechanically, "those are the Iizuka kids. Less than a hundred people here can match my face to my name, and those kids are part of that chosen hundred. Although I'm not the one who did the choosing."

What was he talking about?

He seemed to mumble to himself before he looked me in the eye and asked,

"So what do you want with me? If you want to die, I'd prefer if you just killed yourself instead of bothering me."

That was a bad joke...or at least, it would have been if not for the gravity in his eyes.

And the red stain along the bottom of his clothes didn't help matters. It looked like blood. I wanted to believe it was just a fashion statement, but I felt an instinctive surge of fear and felt my mouth go dry.

"N-not at all. This is a misunderstanding. I...umm...was curious about the girl here. The, uh...the one with the white flowers in her hair."

"...Aha. Lilei."

His eyes softened in an instant and he languidly stepped back.

"Li-Lilei?"

"You didn't even know her name? Are you another pervert drawn by her sickly babyface? I'm not obliged to kill you so I'm going to warn you. I'm warning you to give up. Even if you're going to just hit on her, I can't recommend it. The tattooed warrior boss and the witch of the Western District both adore her. So if you tried anything, you'll end up getting your hand dissolved in diluted sulfuric acid over the course of several days."

Before I could say anything, the man spun and danced oddly.

There was a disturbing number of distressing words in his advice, but I tried my best to ignore them.

The man ignored my fears and continued his rant.

"Dissolving. That can only be excruciating. Being drenched in sulfuric acid is one thing, but we're talking about having your hand dissolved over *days* in solution diluted to its limit. At first your fear's the only thing eating away at you, but that slowly shifts to the reality of a tingling sense of pain. Your blood vessels finally come to the surface. The membranes tear, and the sulfuric acid finally mingles with your blood... That's pretty sickening, now that I think about it. Which is natural, since I'm talking about something very sick. Anyone would be sickened by this. It's only natural. You think so too, right?"



"Ahem. Excuse me. Can I go now?"

It was dangerous to stay here any longer.

I wanted to leave somehow, but I couldn't shake the thought that taking off was only going to provoke this man.

"I...umm...I was curious about the girl because she resembles my long-lost sister. I'm not going to lay a hand on her."

"Hm?"

The man's piercing gaze seemed to scrutinize me.

"Your clothes say you haven't been on the island for long."

"Huh? Oh. No. Only about a week."

I remained civil, even though he wasn't being particularly polite. I shouldn't anger him. His entire being seemed to reek of danger.

"Then maybe you're still normal. I guess you could call this a stroke of fate."

He nodded to himself, then clapped his hands together.

"Okay. Listen. Suppose there is a birthday."

"Wh-what?"

"I can't tell you whose it is, but there's...someone very important to me. Important in the romantic sense. Very very important. I want to hold a surprise party for this person...or maybe just surprise them. But a surprise necessitates that I can't ask what this person wants ahead of time. So what would be a good surprise? This is a very important answer for my personal future. So I want you to give me a good answer."

His eyes remained as droopy as ever, but his tone grew firm.

This wasn't good.

I felt like he would kill me no matter what I answered. Or was it just my imagination?

"I-I guess you could go for the classic. ...Maybe handmade chocolate?"

What the hell was I saying? That's for Valentine's Day.

And men didn't give women chocolates on Valentine's.

...Wait. Maybe this guy was gay, and he was talking about getting a gift for a man...?

"..."

But the man furrowed his brow and stared at me.

His eyes were murky.

I was no expert, but even I could see at a single glance.

He was no villain.

He was not like the suits from my company, either.

He was just abnormal.

A plain old villain might have been easier to talk to. Because I would know what would move him to act.

This man, though. He looked normal, but I could tell his gears didn't fit together with people like me. If he were a gear in a clockwork mechanism, he'd be the type whose teeth squirmed randomly in...no no no no no let's not go in this direction ugh this is freaking me out—

I surrendered.

But at that moment—

"I see."

The man backed even further away and nodded with surprising ease.

"In other words, I just have to send her a love letter. I understand."

"What...?"

"Thank you. There really is no beating a normal person for answers like this. As a token of my gratitude I'll pretend I never saw you so you should hurry and leave or climb up to see Lilei. Oh, but you shouldn't wait around here for her to show up. She's got a posse of men following her to the building entrance," he said plainly.

I could only nod.

I could feel cold sweat evaporating off my face.

I...must have preserved my own life.

The man continued to ramble without giving me the chance to calm myself.

"Lilei is a princess of the gang that controls the Western District. Not the oldest princess, but her siblings adore her. So if you do touch her, you'll really end up with your hand in a beaker of sulfuric acid. Bye."

With a wave of the hand, he began to walk away.

He slithered into an alleyway and disappeared.

What...the hell...?

What just happened?

I must have been dreaming or hallucinating or something.

I said *chocolate*. So why'd he talk about a love letter? That was more than just a case of broken telephone.

Anyway, I was glad to be alive.

The girl still bothered me, but I decided to back off for today.

The Western District. A gang. A princess.

I told myself that it wasn't a bad haul of information.

...

Wait, what was I saying?

'For today'?

Was I going to keep searching for this girl tomorrow and on and on?

I tasted death when I met that man.

And I didn't necessarily have anything to say to that girl. I didn't necessarily want to befriend her.

So why was I so drawn to her?

Because. That was all I could say.

But why? Why...?

But. That's right. But.

I didn't know why. *But* I was drawn to her.

It felt like I wasn't supposed to understand the reason, but at the same time I had to know.

Was this island driving me crazy?

On this island—my mind broke.

...

As if.

...

...

AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!

"AAAAAAAGH! GAAAH!"

As if!

"IIIIIF!"

Why the hell did I have to lose my mind?!

I did the right thing!

I was just trying to expose corporate corruption! So why?! Why did the company boot me out?! Leave me to come to the island?!

I've never once broken company regulations!

I'm not like those minors who smoke on street corners!

I'm not like those punks who loiter in front of convenience stores at night!

When I picked up a wallet on the ground, I brought it straight to the police without touching the contents!

When a classmate joked about shoplifting, I went straight to the teacher!

When someone retaliated, I made them face justice!

Society protected me! Because I did what was right by society!

So why?! The corporation that flaunted the laws that make up the foundations of society remained immensely powerful, while I was stuck being a helpless nobody. Why?

Why the hell was I on this island?!

Why, goddammit?! Why did I have to fear death at the hands of a lunatic in white?!

Answer me! ANSWER ME!

“—MEEEE! Agh! UAAAAARGH!”

—.

-----.

...

The more emotional I got, the less my voice seemed to work.

By the time my throat began to burn, I was calm again.

It was useless.

This island made people useless.

It was an island of useless people. It made even healthy people rot.

It was sick. This island was sick.

Maybe that was why that girl had such ill eyes.

As though she was sick of the injustice surrounding us all...

At that point, I stopped and decided to go to my makeshift bed.

Someday, I will learn more about her.

It's a small island.

Almost no one leaves this place, so I know I'll see her again.

Unless one of us becomes a corpse before that.

~My Heart-Pounding Nap Diary~

----- th, 2021.

Yakumo Amagiri is happy. Today.

He said. Happy birthday Nazuna. He said.

Sword woman in East. It is strong. I know.

It is adorable. It is cool.

I meet her. Meet few times. Want to hug. No. She said. It is sad.

But Yakumo likes Nazuna. Nazuna does not like Yakumo.

Yakumo can hug Nazuna. Probably. Hug. I am jealous.

Yakumo is happy.

Roll roll roll beside me.

Roll roll roll roll roll roll roll roll.

It is like cat.

It is adorable. Hug.

Today I hug. Hug adorable things. Many adorable things.

I find Yua.

Yua makes maps. It is cool. It is hardworking.

Wow. It is strong. It is adorable. Hug.

Rats are adorable.

I hug. Hug.

Nejiro in wheelchair. Nejiro escapes.

It is adorable. Hug.

I find Charlotte. Detective Charlotte.

I hug. Hug.

It is embarrassed.

It is adorable. Hug.

Kitty in East. Engine turn off. It is shy. It is adorable.

I try to hug.

No. Elder Brother said. It is mean.

I hug lots. And lots.

Hug.

Today I dream. It is bad dream.

I am not happy.

So I hug.

Adorable things. Lots and lots.

Hug. Hug. Lots of hugs.

It is warm.

It is comfortable.

Hug.

Not sleepy yet.

More bad dreams. It is bad.

Not happy.

I am sad.

Nine years ago, somewhere on the artificial island.

It had been a year since the ray of hope in her world was gunned down.

The replacement arrived not long afterwards.

This one said nothing, unlike the woman.

It must be a scary, strict person, the girl assumed. But something was not right.

The new helper's movements sounded haphazard. They did not try to approach the girl very much.

But they did not get too far away, either.

Who was the new helper?

The girl without hope began to speculate, as though to fill in the gap in her heart.

After all, she had no light and no hope for the outside world.

At that point, the girl with the sealed eyes could take care of herself reasonably well. But one day, the helper lost their balance and stumbled on their way to serve food, and the girl ended up catching the helper in her arms.

The helper was very thin and frail. She felt no strength in that body.

The girl had known from the footsteps that the helper was not large, but this was even lighter than she had imagined. Smaller.

When the helper flinched, the girl realized the truth.

The helper in her arms was a child around her own age.

Afterwards, the girl did everything she could to try and communicate with the helper—whose gender she couldn't tell—but no amount of speaking or prodding would provoke a voice out of them.

Eventually, the girl gave up on talking to the silent helper and decided to take their simple presence as a bond.

With even the shards of hope extinguished, the girl began to wander between dreams and reality in the darkness.

After all, the only place she saw light was in her dreams.

Those born without sight do not see in their dreams.

Those who lose their sight through accident or illness receive visual information in their dreams based on their memories.

Though the girl's eyes had simply been sealed, just like the latter case the memories of the world she saw before her blinding came to life. And they merged with her fantasies and delusions to create all sorts of dreams.

In her dreams, she clearly saw the world from before her blinding. She saw her mother's face clearly.

Her memories with her mother, which were fading in the waking world, were reenacted in her dreams with stunning clarity. Perhaps it was part of a system her brain was creating to protect her psyche.

For the girl, her dreams were her light.

Because she was permitted only to sleep, that was the only proof of her existence.

But the long darkness threatened to take away even her dreams.

A month passed—

And for the first time, she felt fear.

It was different from the terror of being locked in darkness. This fear crept into her heart with the return of her sense of reason.

What had the men done to her previous helper, who had spoken to her?

The girl no longer even remembered the color of the men's eyes—even though that was the least thing she had seen in the light.

And it was because she had lost all hope—because she grew used to the darkness—that she could fight the fear head-on.

What were the men going to do to her?

Before that, who were they?

Did they know her mother?

What were they going to do to her?

Who were they?

The same questions echoed in her mind endlessly, and with each round something slushy in her mind seemed to grow more and more viscous.

The fear slowly took on solid shape, and eventually became a monster in her world of darkness.

Two months passed—

The girl was pursued by fear.

The mysterious men created by her fear.

Sleep was supposed to be her one place of rest.

But fear incarnate—the very fear she had personally nursed—began encroaching on her peaceful dreams.

The fear grew out of control in her dreams, each and every stem sprouting countless leaves. In her dreams they were twisted—the men's hands—

Their hands hands hands hands hands hands hands hands hands
hands hands hands hands hands hands hands hands hands hands
hands hands hands hands hands hands hands hands hands hands
her eyes handshandshandshandshandshandshandshandshandshandshands

handshandshandshandshandsreachingforhereyessmoothlystrokingthes
moothsurface—

The eyes fell out of the men's faces, leaving behind gaping holes.

The scene was playing out in color in her dreams, but the holes left where the men's eyes had been were pure darkness, just like her waking world.

Pitch black holes.

Three pitch black holes in each face. They pulled in even the sounds of her dreams as they slowly drew near.

More and more fingers popped up to stroke her eyes. From each hand sprouted a dozen masses of flesh as they began to stroke and stroke and—

—and they became rough.

The strokes degenerated little by little as the fingers scraped and scratched and scratched and scratched and scratched and scratched and scratched and carved and carved—

It was like her eyes were being carved out. The sensation ate away at her mind.

In her dreams, the fingers tore out her eyes.

Not by the tips of their nails, but by their rough fingertips. Little by little.

But the sheer number and energy behind the fingers was immense. Each and every one felt like a chisel.

They would turn her eyes into holes, just like their own.

The girl was helpless. She had to submit to her nightmare.

Three months passed—

The girl decided to fight.

Though she was a child, she understood.

There was no help in this deep darkness.

That went doubly so in dreams.

The nightmares twisted into even more grotesque shapes, the men's bodies now no longer human.

The three holes in each of their faces spread to the rest of their bodies, and their figures grew to the size of giants. Countless hands and fingers sprouted from their bodies, and any empty space was filled by a gaping hole.

The men merged together and slowly encroached on her world.

By expanding the holes in their bodies, they would plunge her dreams into darkness.

And so her struggle began.

It was the moment the men's twisted fingers reached for her dream-mother.

Before she knew it, she was screaming.

She could not make such a loud noise in the waking world.

It was in her dreams that the terrified girl finally remembered how to scream.

To protect her last shred of sanity—her memories with her mother—from the grotesque monstrosities threatening her mind.

At that moment, the world went dark.

She realized that she had awoken.

The waking world was immersed in deeper darkness than sleep.

At that point, blindness was no longer painful.

All that agonized her was the fact that she was permitted to do nothing but the essentials in her waking hours.

Was she to be thankful for at least having a clean home and good food? Or should she feel humiliated for being treated like a pet? She did not know.

Perhaps, then, it was a miracle that the choice to fight had occurred to the girl who was not yet 10.

While awake, she thought about what she could do.

How could she remove the men from her dreams?

All kinds of images from her days before the darkness flashed past her thoughts.

She wracked her brains for a solution.

She could not think of any way to control her dreams, but eventually the girl came to a conclusion.

She had to become strong.

She just had to become strong enough to fight off the finger monsters.

At that point, she imagined herself driving off the monsters.

But she didn't think punching and kicking would make them go away.

Then she remembered a cartoon she had seen with her mother in the past.

It was a show about a magical girl who fought monsters with a magic wand.

—Magic. Wand.

In the darkness, she began to search for a potential weapon.

Naturally, she found nothing.

So she decided to speak to her helper for the first time in a very long time.

"...-----."

First, she slowly practiced using her voice.

Then she stammered,

"I need...stick. Strong. Stick."

Naturally, there was no response.

The girl gave up on the helper and began to brainstorm ways to fight barehanded. But the concept of martial arts did not yet exist in her mind. And even if it did, she had no one to learn from and no example to emulate.

Being blind was no disadvantage. She wasn't going to fight her captors to escape—she simply wanted to destroy the monsters in her dreams.

Perhaps she could use the fact that she fought in her dreams to give herself magic or special powers. But even with her near-lucid state in her dreams, she could not train herself as she wished.

One reason was that she suspected monsters like the ones in her dreams might exist in the real world as well. So she needed a weapon she could also use in her waking world.

Change came again some time later.

As the girl thought late into the night, she heard a clang.

She reached over; she felt a cold, hard stick.

The helper must have heard her request.

"Thank you."

The girl breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that she could use her voice, and grasped the stick.

It was only later that she understood that the weapon was a lead pipe the helper had snuck in from a junkyard.

Now the girl had a weapon from the waking world to help her fight her nightmares.

She began by swinging her unrefined stick.

She waited for the helper's footsteps to grow distant so as to avoid hitting them—

—and she began to swing to her heart's content.

Her movements were inelegant.

It looked like nothing more than the tantrums of a frustrated child. But it was a good start.

The lead pipe that had once been doomed to rust in a junkyard had given the girl a purpose.

And her heart once more fell into her dreams.

Half a year passed—

She fought her nightmares in her dreams.

In the darkness of reality, she swung and swung, and built up the strength to control her movements efficiently.

The sensation of swinging the lead pipe was burned into her body and mind, reflected in her dreams.

Each night in her nightmares she fought off the endless waves of monsters.

But as long as fear existed in her heart, the monsters knew no surrender. They sprouted up again and again.

Even faster.

Even heavier.

Even more grotesque.

The things she saw were, perhaps, not simply dreams. Perhaps they were delusions she had created. She dreamed about the same things to the point of curiosity, and each time she faced off against even stronger monsters.

At times, she was pierced by over a thousand tentacles.

At times, the monsters' fingers stretched so quickly that they poked out her eyes.

At times, she was dissolved in the acid the monsters secreted.

When the girl woke up, her dreams engulfed by darkness, she thought to herself.

How could she beat them? How should she move? What should she do?

Those were the only thoughts on her mind. And she did as her conclusion dictated: train herself to move with the speed and force she desired.

Without any clear instructions on her training, she practiced with only her delusions as a guide.

She had plenty of chances to practice in the battles in her dreams.

The experiences in her delusions were compiled in her body, and the training from her times in the waking world put a framework to the experiences from her dreams.

But no matter how many times she defeated the darkness, each time she fell asleep yet new monsters arose in her dreams.

She did not give up.

Between the cycle of dreams and reality, the girl remembered what had happened half a year earlier.

Before the previous helper tried to take her away, she had said, "an adorable girl like you shouldn't be here".

The girl didn't know if she really was adorable or not. and even if she did, it wouldn't make a difference.

But she continued to fight in her dreams.

She had no way of knowing now where the helper had been trying to take her.

But she knew—even at her age, she understood.

That dreams were her last refuge now.

When she lost her dreams—when she gave up—she would truly disappear, along with her memories of her mother.

The monsters were not allowed to be there.

They were not adorable.

'Go away.'

The monsters her mind created regenerated and grew endlessly.

But each time, they were destroyed by the magic wand in her hand.

Again and again and again and again.

So long as the darkness of reality was cast over her dreams.

So long as light existed in her dreams.



Eight and a half years later, somewhere on the island.

It had been nearly 24 hours since I escaped from the psycho in white.

I found myself in front of the TV at the fountain.

I thought I could meet that girl again if I came here.

But there wasn't a big crowd of kids here today.

A few people with time on their hands stopped and stared at the screen.
That was it.

This was a waste of time.

I decided to come back when the wrestling show was on again.

Although this TV doesn't seem to have a programming schedule. Nobody knew when wrestling was gonna be on again.

With a sigh, I turned to leave—

But I stopped when I spotted a flash of white on the screen.

<Here's an update on the Western District cutie who returned to the great beyond recently. The Western District officially expressed its grief and will be holding the girl a funeral. Not surprising, since she was practically a celebrity. The volunteer police are down in the dumps too, but the one who should really be thrown in the shityard would be the sick fuck who killed her
—>

The DJ's voice grew distant in my head. I was distracted.

The victim shown on the TV was wearing white flowers in her hair.

Did someone kill her?!

I ran over to the TV, drenched in cold sweat—

But she turned out to be someone else wearing the same flowers. She wasn't the one I was looking for.

What a relief.

Almost jumped to conclusions there.

It wasn't her.

I almost lost it when I thought the girl named Lilei was the victim.

...I really was obsessed with her.

What was going on?

Maybe leaving was the best choice. Forcing myself back to the mainland.

But I couldn't.

I couldn't ever go back to that company.

I had to spend the rest of my life here. I had to live with the strange reality that I was being attracted to a girl I'd glimpsed just once.

I decided to leave with a sigh, but the pirate radio playing from the screen and the speakers all over the island shook my thoughts again.

<We've had a rash of villain deaths on the island recently. But I hope none of you bastards are happy cause you think you aren't villains. We don't even know who's behind this crap and what they're trying to do. You never know. Maybe they'll char-broil you with a flamethrower after they accuse you of exhaling carbon dioxide and contributing to global warming. All the veterans here know their shit. The rules from five minutes ago don't mean fuck now. On this lawless island, good and evil can switch places depending on which side of the bed the other person woke up on!>

I felt something stir deep in my gut.

Villains were being killed.

That was nothing to get upset about.

I knew all too well that some injustices simply couldn't be punished by the law.

So I wasn't surprised vigilantes went after wanted criminals hiding on the island.

But there was no guarantee that only bad people were murdered.

The girl I'm looking for—in the words of the psycho in white—had blood ties to a gang that controlled the island.

That alone raised the chances of her death.

...No.

In fact, it was reason enough for someone to want to kill her.

Seized by terror, I found myself running through the alleys.

I was headed for the roof of the building the kids led me to yesterday.

They said the interior was so full of junk it was impossible to navigate.

But I had to get there, even if it meant clearing that hurdle.

It was only when the possibility of her murder occurred to me—

—that I finally understood.

Why was I so drawn to her? Because she was completely pure.

That's why she looked so familiar. Because I must have seen that same purity in another child on the mainland.

A girl like her didn't belong on this island.

Someone had to rescue her from the malice lurking here.

It was the right thing to do.

I had no reservations in my heart.

This was how I felt when I revealed my company's injustices.

The people of this island might have looked down on me. But I didn't care.

I lost everything before I landed here. I had nothing more to lose.



Two hours later. The rooftop.

I was finally here.

Finally. I'd made it.

I crawled over haphazard heaps of trash, climbed mountains of junk, and sometimes crept between broken wires. No wonder people never came here, even to look for a place to sleep.

In other words, the girl was isolated.

I didn't know how she got up here. Maybe there was a secret passageway.

But there was no time to look for one.

I was covered in scrapes and cuts, but there was no time to worry about that.

And now that I thought about it, that psycho in white was a problem.

I saw him climbing down from here.

He climbed the walls of the building. Like some kind of lunatic.

It was dangerous to be alone with a psycho like him.

She might have been safe now, but who knew what he might do one day?

And even before that, what if her mind broke?

Maybe it already was broken.

Then that was all the more reason to help her.

Who would help her? Obviously, me.

Because I wasn't brought here by my own faults or wrongdoings.

I was exiled here for doing the right thing.

...Maybe I was acting self-righteous. But that didn't matter.

Because...if I didn't have any purpose at all, my mind would be the first thing crushed under the island's weight.

By rescuing the girl, I wanted to rescue my mind.

I forced the rusted door open. A warm breeze stroked my face.

And there she was.

The door creaking must have surprised her. She looked at me.

But her eyes were the same as before. As if she were looking at the world from far away, from a world behind a glass wall.

"H-hey. ...Nice to meet you...I guess?"

I didn't know how to start. So I dusted myself off and smiled.

She didn't smile or frown. She took a step toward me and spoke.

"...I see you. In front of TV. I hug children. You watch me."

Her Japanese wasn't very good. Maybe she really was from the Chinese gang.

I wondered how I should tell her about my wanting to help her escape this hellish island. About everything that led up that realization. I eventually decided to begin with a light chat.

I had to make sure we had no misunderstandings between us.

"Oh. Umm... Well...so you know. So I, uhh...don't want any misunderstandings here. I don't know if you'll believe me, but I just want you to know that I'm not attracted to you. I'm not going to try and do anything to you!"

"...It is not interesting," she mumbled, and took another step.

Damn it. How was I supposed to explain myself?

I wished I'd thought of something before I clambered here.

I didn't see the gangsters who were supposed to be her family.

At that moment, I heard a gunshot.

"?!"

More followed. The gunshots shook the air.

I froze. But she was unfazed.

"Gunshots. It is below. It is no matter. It is Inui. It is Mr. Kugi. Kill enemy. Or each other."

"Oh. Um. I...see?"

I had no idea who 'Inui' and 'Mr. Kugi' were but from the girl's complete lack of fear I could tell she was not normal.

The island must have destroyed her mind.

I had to do something.

And what was going on down there? Why was there a shootout happening below?

At one point I had assumed that gunfire was part of daily life on the island. But the volunteer police seemed to be on top of things. I rarely ever heard gunshots in the Western District.

"H-hey. Get down so you don't get hit by a stray bullet. Listen to me."

I doubted that a girl standing in the middle of the rooftop would be hit by a stray bullet, but I had to figure out a way to start the conversation.

Without even an icebreaker in mind, I began by reaching out my right hand.

I had to show her that I meant no harm.

It was all right. She would trust me.

Because I was doing the right thing.

Clang.

I heard a metallic noise behind her.

She must have been dragging something around.

What was it? I could barely see her face, but the moonlight and the glow from the buildings hit the object and—

—at that moment, she flicked her right wrist.

And then, somehow the long object in her hand moved—faster than my eyes could follow—

Crunch.

It was completely different from the earlier sound.

At the same time, my body was shaken.

"Agah."

I stuttered foolishly.

Why did I just...why...whaaaaaaa...?

What the hell.

I realized that my right wrist was limp—like it was a completely separate creature—and at that moment, I was overcome by pain.

"Wha...? Ah... GAAAAAAAHH!"

I screamed. I howled.

The pain in my wrist ran up my arm and coursed through my body, and my own shrieking threatened to rupture my eardrums and tear my vocal cords.

And as though filling in the gaps—

Her gloomy voice echoed coldly against my ears.

"I see you. In front of TV.

"I should have. Should have kill you. Kill you then."

~My Heart-Pounding Nap Diary~

----- th, 2021.

On rooftop.

Not-adorable person. It comes.

I kill. I did.

Seven years ago, somewhere on the artificial island.

Change came to her life about a year and a half after she began to battle her nightmares.

She had managed to conquer her nightmare for the day and was about to drift into a deep sleep—

She thought she heard angry voices from afar.

Then the sound of small blasts.

If her memories were correct, those were gunshots.

With that in mind, she slowly woke herself.

By then, a scream that seemed to curse the world had already shaken the darkness and faded away.

And in less than a minute, she heard the door crash open.

She felt someone cling to her. From the person's weight she supposed it must have been her helper.

And from the way the helper shook, the girl supposed that they must have been terrified.

She wondered if she should say something. But when she opened her mouth she realized that she was once again barely capable of speech.

At that point, she heard footsteps from the door.

"Turn out the lights. She'll be in pain if it's too bright."

She heard a sharp voice.

The voice belonged to a young man. And it occurred to the girl that she had never heard the voice before.

"Making a second child with that whore...Father's more careless than he lets on."

The man grumbled under his breath, but the girl did not understand. Then he began to gingerly peel off the talismans from her eyelids. She thought he might tear them off by force, but he showed surprising care as he slowly removed the talismans.

Once they were off, the girl felt something on her face—it felt just like when her face was being washed.

But something was different this time. A strong-smelling liquid was applied to her eyelids, then carefully wiped away.

She finally noticed the unusual sensation on her face.

Her eyelids moved.

At first they barely opened, but as she lifted them little by little, she began to see the things she had only seen in her dreams.

"How does it feel to see light for the first time in years?"

He had said that the lights were off.

The only light in the room should have been the dim glow from the hallway.

But even that was too much for her.

The faint light hit her eyes and began to run wild.

It was like going outside after an all-nighter, but magnified a million times. Even the dim glow was excruciating for her eyes, for so long adjusted to darkness.

That her vision returned over the course of only a few minutes was perhaps thanks to the realistic dreams she had faced every night.

But it took her yet more minutes to finally be able to see.

Her eyes and her head still hurt. But she did not scream.

Her optic nerves remembered how to see and kicked the muscles around her eyes into action. Meanwhile, the young man spoke as though to himself.

"These eyes...I knew it. They're just like that young vixen's."

Another voice then spoke.

"You're still quite young yourself, now."

"Please, Elder."

The young voice and a voice clearly belonging to an elder were conversing.

Drip. She heard something falling.

In a corner of her recovering vision she saw something red dripping from tip of the shining object in the young man's hand.

But the girl was not afraid.

After all, the men in her dreams rose from pools of blood and breathed blood like fire.

"Do you remember your name, little girl?" The young man asked in Mandarin. The girl took a few seconds to prepare her voice, then mumbled.

"...Lilei. Lilei Horrocks."

"I see. You will no longer need your mother's family name."

Confused, the girl—Lilei—slowly looked up.

She saw the face of a boy. He had sharp eyes, and he seemed to be about five or six years older than herself.

The boy with tattoos on his face placed his Chinese broadsword across his shoulder and continued, his eyes as cold as ice.

"And if you cannot overcome the trial I have prepared for you...you will not need *our* family name. Or your own, for that matter."

He gave a signal. A group of men in black entered the room.

They dragged in a small figure and threw it at Lilei's feet.

As her eyes adjusted, Lilei realized that it was a young girl, only a little smaller than herself.

At the same time, she came to a realization.

This girl must have been the helper who had been at her side.

"Her vocal cords seem to be damaged. Did they do this to keep your existence a secret? An obsolete strategy. It would have been over for them the moment she learned to communicate."

"..."

"Her condition aside, this girl is one of the people who took away your light."

The young man pressed down on the back of the helper's head with the broadsword.

Then he raised his chin. One of the men in black drew a knife and offered it to Lilei.

She took it and stared, wide-eyed.

The young man gave her an uncharacteristically cold look.

"Kill her."

A single command.

"We've killed the rest. This pup is all that's left. She may have been your caretaker, but no matter the circumstances she is one of the rabble who imprisoned a member of the Ei bloodline."

"...Kill...?"

"You must take revenge. We have no need of anyone who is incapable of such a trivial act."

Lilei comprehended what he meant.

She was to kill the girl who had taken care of her—the girl whom she had only now seen for the first time.

If not, she would die as well.

Lilei was only about 10 years old. But she could sense the bloodlust in the boy's voice and bearing.

It was the first time she had ever felt such bloodlust.

But she was not particularly shaken.

After all, she had lived in the carnage of worse things; the grotesque creatures she had created in the dreams during her time in darkness.

Lilei was silent for a long time. But she eventually looked around, her eyes finally adjusted to the light.

Her eyes came to a stop at a certain point. She tossed the knife aside and walked over—and before the men could react, she picked up the object on the floor.

It was a partly rusted lead pipe.

"So you'd prefer to bludgeon her to death?"

Ignoring the young man, Lilei stared at the pipe.

It wasn't as colorful as she had imagined.

But she was not too rattled.

After all, the magic wand in her dreams was already long stained with blood.

She walked back to the young man and the girl in the very same rhythm as before.

This time, she stared down at the girl on the floor.

The girl's vocal cords really must have been damaged, as she moved her mouth but did not vocalize.

The girl, who was covered in injuries from head to toe, looked up tearfully at Lilei.

She was a nondescript girl. Simply an adorable child.

Why was someone like this looking after her, Lilei wondered.

Then she remembered something.

What had the previous helper said as they ran?

"I have a daughter just about your age, a little younger than you."

"I watched over you because I at least wanted to free my little girl."

"Adorable children should be happy. But, you're adorable, but my daughter too. Yes. If an adorable girl like you is happy, my daughter will too..."

In the jumble of memories, Lilei came to a conclusion.

This girl was the previous helper's daughter.

She quietly went up to the girl and knelt.

Then she placed a gentle hand on her head. The girl flinched, but when Lilei patted her head she stared, wide-eyed.

She reminded Lilei of a puppy.

"...Adorable."

"What?"

The young man frowned. Lilei continued mechanically. For herself, the one who protected her world.

"This girl. She is adorable. She has to live. Or I can't live. If the adorable girl is happy, I am happy... She said."

"I don't claim to understand completely...but you mean you cannot kill her."

To the tattooed boy, Lilei's words must have sounded like delusional rambling.

He raised his broadsword and drew an air around himself to cut down both Lilei and the girl in one stroke.

"Not to fear. You will die together here and now."

Lilei looked at the broadsword, and instead of trying to run, she thought to herself.

'What is this.'

'What is he trying to do?'

'Is he going to kill us?'

'I'm not scared.'

'I'm not scared this time. But—'

'He's an enemy, too.'

She did not differentiate between dreams and reality now.

She could defeat the enemy that threatened to take away her light, just as she did in her dreams.

That was all that mattered to her.

Lilei simply glanced at the boy.

The boy with the broadsword felt a chill run down his spine.

His pores seemed to scream as the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

'What's happening?'

He was a stranger to this sensation. The boy froze without thinking.

'No. I've felt this before.'

'I know this sensation...'

'It's just like the time I faced a gun for the first time.'



'Like the time I first felt a blade against my neck.'

The boy who had clawed through countless battles felt his instincts screaming.

He had just stepped into mortal peril, they warned him.

'Impossible!'

'Am I...afraid of a child like her?!"

Refusing to accept the fact that he was cowed by a single glance, the boy decided to shake off that fear by swinging his sword.

But then, he felt an impact on his hand. Something glinted as it flew across the room.

The moment he realized that the object was the tip of his sword, he saw that the girl at his feet had moved.

But it was too late. She had moved out of his line of sight.

"?!"

He heard a resounding impact near his left temple.

He saw a creaking lead pipe right before his eyes, and a foot clad in a black shoe that had deflected the pipe.

"My word. I thought I'd taught you well, Lihuang."

The one who saved his life was the old man who had come to the room with him.

"You must obey your instincts when they cry out in fear. What I taught you was self-defense."

"..."

Even as the old man spoke, Lilei continued to swing her pipe at uneven intervals.

The man Lihuang had earlier called 'Elder' parried the attacks with practiced ease as he spoke to the girl in Mandarin.

"Not to worry, young one. We will do nothing to you. Or the adorable young lady."

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than did the attacks stop.

"...Really?"

"Yes. I swear I will make them stop."

"Elder."

The boy stepped forward, disgruntled that the old man was pursuing the matter without his input. But he quickly noticed the sweat on his hands and instinctively realized that he had just narrowly escaped death.

The old man laughed jovially.

"Lihuang. I will take your sister under my care for the time being."

"...What will you do with her, Elder?"

"What I taught you and Yili was simply self-defense. I did not instruct you in the ways of killing. However..."

He grinned fiendishly and gently put his hand on Lilei's head.

"I've gotten the urge to teach this child ways to kill and break people. I am not a young man anymore. And though these techniques may be of little use in modern times, I do not think it would be such a bad idea to pass them on."

"But Elder..."

The boy was stubborn. But the old man was ruthless.

"I can't have you getting jealous later, so I will tell you now. This girl is more talented than you are."

"What...?"

"More importantly, you almost lost your life to her just now."

"...!"

The tattooed boy's expression changed. The elder continued.

"I know what you're thinking, Lihuang. 'How could a concubine's daughter surpass me,' you wonder. Worry not, boy. This talent did not come from blood. It is clearly learned. Remember; even your own father has little talent for battle."

The old man walked up to Lilei and stroked her head.

"Aha...I will raise you to be stronger than me in five years' time. I will turn you into a weapon—unnecessary in peacetime, wastelands, or battlefields, useful only on this island. What you do with your life after that is up to you."

The girl thought for some time on the difficult words the old man used.

Then, still looking quite gloomy, she replied.

"I'll be strong? ...So no one stops my dreams?"

The question seemed to come from nowhere, but the old man nodded firmly.

"Of course."

"Okay then."

The girl accepted her fate with surprising ease. The old man guffawed and stroked her head again.

"Ah! Splendid! I like your honesty. Now we have nothing more to discuss, Lihuang."

The old man turned. The tall boy stared anxiously, but eventually he resigned and turned to Lilei.

"Lilei Ei. That is your new name. And from this day forth, you are my sister."

"...Sister?"

"You'll understand the circumstances soon enough. Do you have any questions?"

Don't make the mistake of thinking that you've been saved, said the look on Lihuang's face.

A new hell will be unveiled before your eyes, said his expression.

Lilei looked at him, her lead pipe dragging against the floor.

"Sleepy."

"What?"

"I'm going to sleep. Sleeeeeep."

Immediately, Lilei lay down on top of the helper and closed her eyes.

The helper froze in surprise. But the warmth from Lilei's body seemed to calm her down.

"...What just happened here...?"

"She took the wind right out of your sails, I see. I have the feeling that someone similar to her may be fitting for your future wife, Lihuang. A woman who can instantly deflate the air around you."

"Enough of your jokes, sir."

The boy sighed loudly, then turned to the girl supporting Lilei.

"What is your name?"

The girl flinched, but she wrote her name on the floor with her finger.

"So you're called Fei."

The girl nodded weakly.

"You were lucky, Fei. I will have you remain as Lilei's helper from this point on. ...Elder, I leave the rest in your hands."

With that, the boy led the other men out of the room.

In her terrified confusion Fei came to two conclusions.

One was that she was spared.

And the other was that the one who rescued her was the girl snoring softly on her back.

Her tension drained in an instant. Tears ran down her cheeks.

As though giving her her blessings, Lilei continued to snore.

The girl christened Lilei Ei, who joined the Western District's clan.

Several years later, people once again began to call her 'Sleeping Beauty'.

It was a term of respect.

For her love of sleep, and for the eternal sleep her lead pipe delivered.



Eight years later, the rooftop of an abandoned building.

"Agh... Grrrrrrkaaaaaaaaaargh..."

My own scream is echoing from the distance.

I'm so confused. I don't understand.

What just happened?

What's happened to me?

I can't feel my right hand.

No...I feel something. I feel pain.

It's like there are two of me. One's screaming and bewildered. The other is watching calmly from afar.

But I still don't understand.

What did I just do?

What did she do to me?

"Nrghaaaaaaaa... What...is thiiiiiiiiiiiiis?!"

"It is loud."

I shouted in the midst of my pain. Without even blinking the girl raised her rusted and stained lead pipe and crushed my left wrist.

"GAAAAAAA! Urgh!"

By the time I thought to pull away, the pain was ringing through my body.

My wrist came loose. It dangled dangled dangled dangled dangled
ohgodfuckfuckfuck

"GRAAAA! EEEYARGH! AAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

What is this

What the hell

is

this

I almost lost consciousness.

Writhing in pain, I began staggering around the rooftop like a drunkard.

My first instinct was flight.

My left knee turned. There was an impact.

"GYAAAARGH!"

I thought my leg had exploded.

The pain the
pain the pain the pain the pain the pain the
paaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—

...!

...!

...

My fading consciousness was jolted back into my body at times.

What's happening?

Why

Why is this happening

What did I do what

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!"

Calm down! Calm down!

I have to think! What is happening?!

I-I just came to help!

So why is she beating me with a lead pipe?!

Why? Where? How?

Where? Where did I go wrong?!

Think. Think! Once I figure it out, I'll make it up to her—

And resolve this misundersta—

Ssshh.

I...think I heard something in my ear.

The noise turned to the sound of something deflating as it enveloped me.

As I dragged myself away, I began to feel like the world around me was moving very slowly.

I couldn't move properly. As if I was dreaming.

I just didn't understand what was happening to me.

I had to think.

Why is this girl beating me with a lead pipe?

I came to this island because I did the right thing.

I exposed the company's corruption. That's how it started.

The great power of evil tried to eat away at me. At the world.

...That's right. Evil. You can't really apply a black-and-white morality to the world, but I can guarantee that those bastards—the company bigwigs—were unquestionably evil. I only wanted to expose that and lead the company in the right direction.

But I was fired, and society didn't protect me, either.

In other words, the power of their evil was stronger than the rules of society.

So I was fired.

But I didn't give up.

I had to make them pay for their crimes and stop them from committing any more injustices. I had no intention of returning to work, but I had to do something to help the good people in the company and all the people who would work for it in the future so that they could lead upstanding lives.

The enemy was strong. The CEO, the chairman, and the media execs who covered up the news were all my enemies, too.

So I decided to begin by cleaning up my surroundings.

An executive from the newspaper company that tried to gloss over the corruption. I caught him having an affair on camera.

Then I used the photo to lure him to a deserted place. I hit him with my car and put him in the back seat, taking him deep into the mountains.

And with a great deal of effort, I managed to extract information on the corrupt executives.

Once I had all the details, I no longer needed the man. I didn't need to kill him, either, so I just left him in the mountains.

His arms and legs were broken and he had some ruptured organs, but if he managed to survive three or so months until hiking season, someone would definitely get him help. I don't kill people without a good reason. Because that is not right.

After that, I used the information I obtained to take away the material possessions they had acquired illegally.

First I decided to burn down their homes. Real estate is the easiest way to use dirty money, after all. They might have had bond certificates—and if those burned too, it'd be like killing two birds with one stone.

Because I didn't intend to kill them, I waited until the executives were out at night to start the fires.

Apparently some family members died, but it doesn't bother me too much if I consider that the dirty money went into raising those people.

It didn't bother me.

After that, I kidnapped the CEO's daughter.

I met her as she went home from school, telling her that her father had collapsed. She followed me without a second thought.

You should never get into a car with someone you don't know. It's common sense. And foolishly enough, the company never took back my employee ID when they fired me.

Talk about careless. This is exactly why corruption runs rampant. So I decided to teach the CEO this very lesson by using my old ID to earn the girl's trust. Now they'll reflect on their half-baked system.

After kidnapping the girl, I talked with the CEO over the phone.

He didn't need much convincing to see that I was serious. It was the right choice to send him his daughter's severed fingers and thumbs.

"If you want to kill someone, kill me! M-my daughter has nothing to do with this! I'm the one you want!" He cried.

He had the wrong idea.

I'm no murderer.

I'm not particularly out to get people killed.

I want him to reflect and repent.

What use was there in killing him before that? Killing him would be simply an act of self-satisfaction.

I'm not trying to murder people, I just want to complete the process—I want him to reflect, repent, and fear until the moment he dies.

I mean, sending a laughing madman to the gallows doesn't wash away his crimes.

Everyone would agree. People like them should be tortured before their deaths so that they suffer and repent.

Everyone would agree. So it must be right. No one would think otherwise.

...In any case, if I wanted to purge the CEO and the company of their wrongdoings and create a wholesome world for the other employees, there had to be punishment. The CEO had to repent.

I let him listen to his daughter die.

He screamed more than she did.

What a relief.

If he's so concerned about his daughter, it means he's still not completely inhuman.

Now he'll give up on his corrupt and unjust ways and give that love to his company.

I did the right thing.

But apparently my sentiments weren't conveyed properly to the world. I became a wanted man.

If I was caught, I would obviously be judged by the law.

Then that would mean I am evil.

As if.

No. No. That's not going to happen.

If it did, it would mean I was wrong.

And if I was wrong, what did the CEO's daughter die for?

A girl dying in vain? Things like that only happen in an unjust world.

So I could not let myself be caught.

I had to be in the right, if only for her sake.

I ran so I could give meaning to her death.

That's right. I did nothing wrong.

But the world still did not understand—

And as a result, I ended up here.

...?

Wait.

It's on the tip of my tongue.

Something important. Something so important...

"Hraaagh! Argh! AAAAAAAGH! Stop...stop..."

Shit my mind is synching with my body agaaAAAAAAHHHHH—!

It hurts! I can't think! Fuck! What! The! Hell!

I did the right thing! So...so why?!

"Stop...what did I...do to..."

She was as cold as ever.

"You kill Fei."

"F-Fei?"

"Fei. White flowers in hair. Like my hair. Last week. You kill Fei."

At that moment—

Another memory surfaced.

Not one from long ago.

It was last week—



After wandering for a long time, I'd thought I finally found her.

But when I spoke to her, I realized that she had simply been wearing the same hair decorations.

She looked at me strangely. She was adorable, yes, but her eyes looked completely different from the girl I was looking for.

Unable to hide my disappointment, I'd asked her,

"Are those flowers popular on this island?"

"...?"

"S-sorry. I was just looking for a girl with the same flowers in her hair."

Then she suddenly began gesturing.

She seemed to be pointing at herself.

"No, not you. I'm looking for—"

Then she grabbed me by the sleeve and tried to pull me into the alleys.

...!

I came to a realization.

She was trying to trick me.

She would lure—seduce—me into the alleys and steal everything I had, or she would have a group of men ready to do that work for her.

I've been fooled enough times on this island. I see right through you.

I was furious.

Each time I was fooled, more anger piled up in my heart.

Maybe it was a side-effect of finally sensing danger before it hit me. I lashed out with all my pent-up rage.

When I looked at her, I saw an adorable girl with a still-childlike face. Her eyes were different, but she somehow resembled the girl I was looking for.

That was even more unforgivable.

Dressing just like my angel—trying to fool me into thinking she was her.
Trying to defile her.

That's why this island is hopeless.

Even children like her try to pull the wool over my eyes.

You thought I wouldn't see through this?

This island is hopeless.

So I will make this island right, I suddenly felt.

For whom? For the girl with the empty eyes, who did not match the rest of
the island.

That was why I could not allow an impostor to exist.

I must do the right thing.

Because that's what I've been doing all this time.

So die, you fucking whore.



As the memory hit me, I cried out to the girl.

"W-wait! That 'Fei' wouldn't be...those flowers...the same... URGH!"

The lead pipe shattered my left ribcage.

"You strangled. Your face. On cameras. I asked. Do not tell. Elder Brother.
Elder Sister. Volunteer police. Only me."

"W-wait..."

It was her. The girl on the TV.

I remember breathing a sigh of relief when I realized that the dead girl wasn't Lilei, but a stranger.

I had no idea.

That was all.

How could I have known that she was her friend?!

The girl didn't say a word! On this island of lowlifes!

My mind struggled to try and resolve the misunderstanding, but my body reflexively backed away—and soon I was leaning against the low railings at the edge of the rooftop.

"You are not adorable. I kill you."

"Wait...w-wait. Wait! I-I was just trying to save you!"

All I had were questions—why was she holding a lead pipe? How could she move so inhumanly fast? But there was no time to ponder the answers.

Now that I think about it, I don't know a thing about this girl.

Really. Why was I so drawn to her?

At that moment, someone grabbed me by the neck.

They yanked me back toward the railings. ...In other words, someone had pulled me from beyond the rooftop.

"Hey there."

It was a familiar voice.

I didn't have to turn.

I only met him once, but once was enough to burn his image into my mind.

"Thanks for yesterday."

It's the psycho in white!

Of all the times... Shit!

"Yakumo. Doing what?" The girl stopped and asked the psycho in white.

The psycho named Yakumo replied lazily.

"Oh, well. I was just passing by. But I heard the news. I heard about it all. — And it looks like *you* did something ridiculous. Of all the people you had to kill, it was her dear friend. The girl she thought of as a sister. It's ludicrous from any perspective."

...A dear friend?

...A sister?

What the hell. She never said a thing! Not even when I killed her!

I tried to respond, but the pressure around my neck and the agonizing pain in the rest of my body would not let me.

"Maybe you lost your mind on this island, too. Or maybe you came to this island because you'd lost your mind to begin with. I *am* curious, but I wanted to repay you because you helped me get closer to her."

...Repay me?

"Lilei plans to toy with you for days. It would be only decent to save you, but I can't forgive you for killing Fei. I only met Fei recently, you know. So I decided to compromise."

What kind of crap is he spouting—

"I'll just make it quick."

"Bye."

-----?

-----?!?!?!

What happened to me?

I felt myself rising—the world turned upside-down—

The second I felt myself floating, a powerful force began to pull at me—

The irresistible force known as gravity.

I'm falling.

Down. Down.

Strangely enough, I was calm.

It felt like time had slowed around me.

A moment later, the memories of the past few days bubbled to the surface in clearer detail than before.

The girl I killed. Her gestures.

I saw the way she moved as she pointed at herself.

Now that I think about it, something was familiar about those movements.

...Oh. I get it.

Sign language.

...Maybe that girl couldn't speak.

And when she heard I was looking for someone she knew—

Come to think of it...that alley she was trying to take me to...it leads straight to...to...

Oh. Oh!

Ahahahaha!

It's here! It led *here*!

To this building!

What in the world did I do?!

She wasn't trying to trick me! She was trying to take me to Lilei! She was just showing kindness!

But I misunderstood and ended up killing her!

Ah. I see. I understand.

My god...that's what happened...

...

...

...

Then I guess I deserve to die here.

Because I killed someone without a good reason.

So I must accept this agony!

Because death is my punishment!

Punishment for my misunderstanding!

...That's right. Other than that, everything I did was in the right!

I didn't do anything wrong! My life was an upright one!

I can die with that understanding! Therefore I must have done nothing wrong!

...

But why is the world...so...slow...?

Why am I remembering the past? I'd ignored it all this time.

...

Oh, I see.

So this is how it feels to have your life flash before your eyes.

But the last thing I saw was not my past.

It was the ground, rapidly drawing near.

A rainbow-haired man and a black-haired man taking aim at one another.

Oh. I understand. I'm going to fall between them—

My memories continued. Specifically, they chased after me.

This is my final memory, and here I will—

That's right. I finally understand.

Why I was so drawn to her.

Why she looked so familiar.

I understand! I finally know!

Why she wouldn't leave my thoughts.

It's her eyes eyes eyes eyes eyes eyes

Endlessly murky and endlessly pure eyes eyes eyes eyes eyes eyes

The girl I killed... the CEO's dead daughter had the same eyes eyes eyes
eyes eyes eyes

A hallucination rises out of the ground ground ground ground

The girl I killed rises up and reaches out to me me me me no no no no
no no my body body body body I'm sorry! It's my fault! I was wrong! I admit
it! I'm sorry please spare me forgive me the arms pulling at me no please
forgive me I was was wa—

But a hallucination had no capacity for forgiveness.

A second before I landed, her hand touched my cheek.

Her hand touched my eye.

And something hot leapt into my eye socket—

my stomach my chest at the same time

can't even recognize

ohgodit'ssohotithurtsI'msorryithurtsitburns

brainfirstmyconsciousnessatonce

—crunch.

~My Heart-Pounding Nap Diary~

----- th, 2021.

I write diary. Write properly.

Misunderstand, Yakumo said.

Write properly. About yesterday.

Not-adorable person. Hurt Fei. Come to roof.

After die. Talk to Fei.

Fei cried. It hurt. She said. Died. She said. She cried.

I revenge. I promised.

No revenge, Fei in dark.

Break dark. With lead pipe. Happy.

So I broke.

I broke lots.

End. Yakumo dropped.

Died. Broke. Happy.

Sleep.

Fei happy.

Fei smiles.

We play. It is happy.

I sleep soon. Sleep. Hug. Hug.

The rooftop.

Without sparing a glance at the falling figure, the ghoul in white shrugged.

"Was that nosy of me?"

Lilei shook her head. "No. It is all right. Now it is."

"I've never seen you kill someone so painfully before. Although I guess that's natural, considering how much you cared for Fei."

The girl seemed no different from usual.

Her voice. Her complexion. Her dead eyes. She was completely normal.

"He is bad dream. Break bad dream. Or not happy."

"You can't be happy?"

"Fei."

"...I see. That's sweet of you."

The Killer Ghoul walked over to the stoic girl. He reached over between the flower ornaments and gave her a gentle pat on the head.

"It must have been hard on you, too. I think you could let yourself cry today, at least."

"Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'?"

"She is dead here. Not in dream. I see her anytime."

Dragging her lead pipe loudly across the floor, she met the Killer Ghoul's eyes.

"Adorable children. Must be happy. So Fei sleeps. Sleeps happily. With me. Always dreaming. So I kill. Not-adorable man. Breaks dreams."

Then, she spun where she stood and walked over to the center of the roof—and with the lead pipe still in her grip, she sprawled out on the floor.

"So I sleep. Sleeeeeep. Hug."

Seconds later, Lilei was snoring softly.

The Killer Ghoul, watching from a short distance, thought for a while. Then he came to a realization.

'I see.

'I always assumed Lilei couldn't distinguish between dreams and reality.

'But maybe she did try to distinguish between them. And maybe she concluded that they were one and the same.

'So death doesn't mean much to her.

'Just like people don't fear the void when they go to sleep.

'Lilei isn't scared of the deaths of others.

'She's trying to override the nightmares of her reality with her dreams.'

From a logical perspective, it might seem like simple escapism.

But having spoken with the girl many times after becoming her nap friend, the young man realized that the signs were there all along.

"You're an assassin, right?"

"I am."

"Was there anyone you were reluctant to kill?"

"No. But when Elder Brother said. Kill you. It was lonely. Bye nap friend."

"...You were pretty merciless, though. ...Then what about someone else? One of those adorable kids you love so much? Like your friend Fei?"

"Elder Brother do not ask. From beginning. I say no. He knows."

"But if you won't do it, someone else will."

"I save. If I can't save. I apologize. In dream."

"...?"

"People die. Die someday. But it is dream. Wake up someday. It is same. But I sleep. Dream again. So it is okay."

"In other words, you're a sad girl who can't distinguish dreams from reality..."

"Do not want hear. From Killer Ghoul."

Remembering that exchange, the Killer Ghoul thought.

Sleep was like death, he had said to her, handing her the journal. The girl had tilted her head curiously.

To her, there was no difference between dreams and reality, no difference between reality and death. Perhaps there was no difference between death and sleep worth mourning. Perhaps dreams—the state of nothingness in sleep—were a second life for her.

Wasn't that something terribly sad?

She did not mourn her friend's death, saying she could see her any time in dreams.

Was that really 'living'?

'Even if she loses a loved one...can Lilei not feel that sadness?

'That's heartbreaking, isn't it?'

Perhaps she was the most broken individual on the entire island.

The Killer Ghoul looked into the sleeping girl's face.

She looked happy.

She was at peace, as she never was while awake.

'Maybe she looks as indifferent as ever in her dreams, though.'

The young man sighed. Though he felt pity for her, he wondered quietly if he was being too conceited. He lay down in a corner of the rooftop and looked up at the sky.

Moved by the sparkling stars, he thought to himself.

'But...there are lots of stories about dreams that get so real you can't tell which is real and which is a dream.'

'Then maybe it's not so bad to pick whichever side you prefer and make it your reality.'

'If nothing else, Lilei looks so happy when she's sleeping. ...Yawn...'

The Killer Ghoul quietly fell asleep.

He simply let his mind fall to the void, without dreaming of anything.

As he did, he wondered if that really was death, and thought that he wouldn't know anyway since he'd never died...

And in the end, two sets of soft snoring filled the rooftop.

As though the carnage and death from several minutes earlier had all been a dream.

~My Heart-Pounding Nap Diary~

----- th, 2021.

Fei wake up.

Shadow hurting Fei. Gone.

Happy. Now we play.

Mom Dad here. Happy.

Everyone happy.

I beat dark.

Everyone happy.

Fei laughing. Adorable.

I hug. Hug.

Together forever.

So hug lots and lots. Hug.

Wake up. Yakumo pats head.

Adorable. He said.

Fei more adorable. I said.

"Yes. She is with you. More adorable."

He said.

He is Killer Ghoul. But good person.

If dies, I take him. Take to dreams.

Sword woman. Take to dreams.

Will be friends. Friends with Fei. Everyone happy.

Fei is adorable. Everyone friends.

So everyone happy.

I smiling.

Today. I hug Nejiro. Lots. No escape. Hug.

Everyone adorable.

Everyone cool. Many people.

I am happy.

So I sleep. In peace.

I break bad dream.

So everyone happy.

I hug.

I hug everyone.

Why.

I want to write. Write lots today.

Want suddenly.

So now. I hug. Hug everyone. Right now.

First Nejiro.

Rats are adorable.

I hug lots and lots. hug.

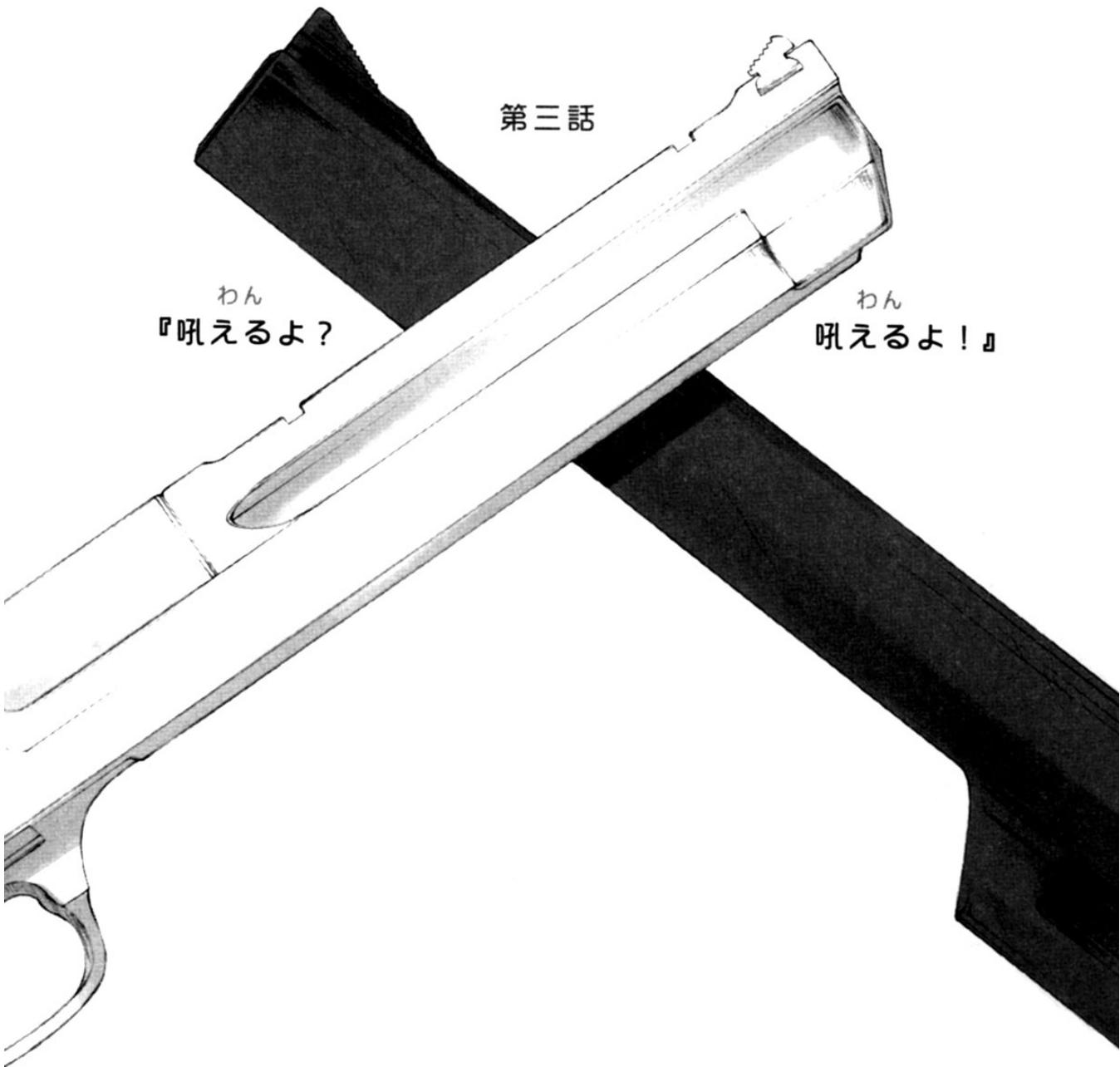
Before. I stop.

Nap time. Walk with people in dream. Yay.

Good night. Hug.

-Episode 2 End-





第三話

わん
『吼えるよ?』

わん
『吼えるよ!』

Episode 3: Bow? Wow!

"...So." Hayato Inui shrugged, holding a smoking gun. "What the hell just happened?" He asked, looking down at the corpse.

At that point, his enemy—Seiichi Kugi, holding a pair of smoking guns—frowned.

"...That's what I want to know."

"So...suicide? Or not. We just shot this sorry sonovabitch. ...Right?"

"...Yeah."

Inui looked back and forth at the corpse and at his foe. Kugi began to look around, on guard against any other potential surprises.

Inui took a step toward the pool of blood and scrutinized the twisted body.

"Christ. It's so messed up you can't even tell who hit what."

"Does it really matter? He was going to die anyway."

"That's cool of ya. What if the poor sap was practicing a new stunt? He might've been about to make a 10/10 somersault landing."

"Then it's his own fault for trying when there was clearly gunfire in the area," Kugi replied, surprisingly playing along. Inui's eyes widened.

"Well, well. I was sure you'd say I was being absurd."

"Reason doesn't exist on this island. You or Yakumo could pull it off. ...And it would've been great if you were the one falling and I were the one doing the shooting."

"Then what're you standing around gabbing for?"

"Same reason as you."

Inui smirked, and put his gun to his own head. "We're both out."

Kugi sighed and lowered his guns. "...You monster. You were counting in the middle of that frenzy?"

"A real-life action hero here, folks. I can tell the sounds of gunfire apart. Maybe I'm the reincarnation of Prince Shotoku. One hair color for each of the seven articles of the constitution."

"Prince Shotoku wrote the *Seventeen-article constitution.*"

With a chuckle, Inui thought to pull the trigger—

'*Wait. Am I really out?*'

A sudden gut feeling drew him to pull the gun away from his head and point it at the ground.

There was a loud noise.

Inui froze as the bullet shattered against the ground.

He looked up and found that Kugi was—for once—visibly surprised. Inui grinned.

"Alakazam!"

"..."

"Alakazam!"

He repeated himself, covered in cold sweat, but contempt and astonishment were already beginning to tint Kugi's surprise.

"Why the hell am I endlessly trying to kill someone like you?"

The air shifted awkwardly around them.

On one side was a man who had just narrowly avoided a most foolish death.

On the other side was a man who had just looked back on his own life and fallen into a mild case of depression.

The half-forgotten corpse between them lolled, giving off a stink.

"Hm. Let's call that bit just now something like, 'I *did* pull something out of my hat. Why can't you see it? Because what I pulled out of the hat was your heart'. Yeah? Cool?"

Kugi's expression grew even darker at Inui's attempt to cover up his failure.

"A heart? ...I threw that away a long time ago. At least, that's what I swore. But if I can't even let go of my hatred, I guess I'm still human. Then maybe I deserve to be a laughingstock. Part of a cheap magic freakshow."

"Whoa, let's not take this *too* seriously here. Sorry, man. My bad. And besides, didn't you leave your heart to Yili? She's the only audience member you've got. I'll be taking peeks from beside the stage, so you gotta face forward! Lose the shame and move on! Cause life is beautiful. One good deed a day, and be good to mom and dad. Got it?" Inui rambled theatrically at length. But Kugi remained as lethargic as ever.

"...Parents, huh."

"Shit. This is getting depressing. Anyway, *I'm* the bitch who almost killed himself. What are *you* brooding about?" Inui snickered. Was he trying to cheer up Kugi, or had he given up on his farce?

Kugi raised his head in response. He pulled his guns back into his sleeves and returned to his usual stoicism.

"...Talking with you really does make me feel strange."

"Is this the first time we've ever talked normally like this? Other than when we're trying to kill each other, I mean?"

"I thought we were still trying to kill each other."

"Aw, shucks. We lost the atmosphere for that. And besides, if the suicidal guy here fell just a couple feet to either side, one of us would've kicked the bucket. ...Oh yeah. Maybe he did deserve to die, since he jumped without even thinking about the people below," Inui prattled. Kugi frowned.

"Pot's calling the kettle black."

"Huh?"

"The men here were fighting *you*."

"Oh. These goons."

They looked around at the corpses and incapacitated men around them as they spoke.

"But you were fighting 'em too, so you can't say I dragged you into this."

"Yili was attacked. I let one go on purpose and followed him here, and you happened to be having yourself a shootout."

"Aha. So that's why you helped me out even though you're itching to kill me?" Inui said, provoking him. But Kugi shook his head.

"I'm just prioritizing something other than my own emotions."

"...So you've got business with me."

"Yeah. So tell me. Who are these people?"

It was a direct question. Kugi instantly restored tension to the air, glaring at Inui with the intent to kill if the latter lied.

Inui must have noticed the change. He gave Kugi the answer he needed, adding no unnecessary details.

He did, however, choose to err on the side of ambiguity.

"My enemies. Or the island's, depending on how you want to look at it."

"Answers."

"Not clear enough for you? C'mon, you have your pick of the litter here, with all these half-dead peons lying around. Just torture the info outta 'em. Simple. Quick. Recommended."

The mad dog smirked. The hound narrowed his eyes and slowly shook his head.

"I already know that these men are after you. And if you have the item or the information they want, I have no reason to let you escape."

"If you don't have a reason, just make one. We could become BFFs on the spot and you could let me go out of friendship or...sorry. Okay, okay. I'll be serious 'bout this," Inui sighed in defeat, sensing bloodlust from Kugi.
"They're not locals. I mean that in more than one sense."

"What?"

"They're not from the island, and they're not the types who'd want to live here. But they still need the island to stuff their wallets. They need the island, but it's not important to them personally. Kinda like livestock. They pull the kind of shit people on the mainland call inhuman. Which is pretty ironic since they do this stuff *because* they're human. Heh."

"What are you talking about? Who are these men?"

Though the stink of blood ran thick in the air, the dogs conversed without even trying to cover their noses.

The 'fallen' corpse at their feet practically didn't exist at this point. It was almost eerie to see the conversation take place with the body decorating the midpoint between them.

"These goons are a lot simpler than what you and the Western District think they are."

The mad dog's rainbow hair fluttered in the wind as he emphasized the absurdity of the situation.

"I guess you could call 'em...champions of justice."



At the same time, somewhere in Japan. Inside a warehouse on a waterfront.

"Wiped out?"

It was a warehouse district at a certain harbor, quite a distance from the city.

Rows upon rows of identical warehouses lined the area. And as there were no ships working overnight, the harbor looked almost eerie.

But in that deserted place was a particular spot positively swarming with movement. Many men were busy at work inside a large warehouse near the center of the harbor.

In a corner of the warehouse, behind a particularly large shipping container, a rugged man spoke emotionlessly.

"How many did you send in?"

"Thirty-six, boss. Almost half our main forces," replied his subordinate, covered in cold sweat.

"You said contact was secure. Did the islanders get wind of us?"

"N-no, boss. Actually..."

"What."

The boss shot the flustered subordinate a cold glare.

The subordinate dared not close his mouth under such pressure, and so continued his report.

"It's...the opposite, boss. About 10 of our men went after the Inui guy."

"You'd better not tell me that he wiped 'em out alone."

"No! Of course not, boss." The subordinate forced himself to smile, himself in disbelief about what he was about to say. "There were two of 'em."

"..."

"And before you ask, our men weren't ambushed or tricked. We're the ones who jumped him, but someone else showed up—some guy with a gun in each hand—and a bit before that, we lost contact with five men who went to attack a Western District exec. That might have something to do with this."

The subordinate desperately tried to convey as much information as possible before the boss lost his temper.

That was when the boss laughed.

"Hah... Ahahahaha! Hahahahahah!"

"B-boss..."

"A gun in each hand... Like a goddamned John Woo flick! Hahahaha!"

The rugged man howled in laughter like a teenager watching a comedy show, slapping his knee. It almost looked like a show of insanity, but the subordinate—not knowing what to do—laughed along.

"Hah, hah hah hah..."

"What a riot! Hey, why aren't you laughing?!"

"Hah hah hah hah hah hah..."

The subordinate continued, a chill running down his spine.

And as though in encouragement, the boss stood and began to pat the subordinate's shoulders.

"Hahahahahaha! Ahahahahahah!"

"Hah, hah hah hah hah..."

And at that moment, the boss put his hand against the subordinate's neck and slammed it against the corner of a nearby container.

"Grk."

"Ahahahaha! C'mon! Laugh! Ahahahaha!"

The subordinate fell powerlessly to his knees. This time, the boss kicked him in the head.

"Urk."

The sound of a nose breaking. A spray of red appeared on the container wall, starting from the subordinate's face.

"It's hilarious! Why aren't you laughing?"

Though he kicked again and again with his thick-heeled shoe, the boss took extra care to make sure he never landed a fatal blow. There was a smile on his face.

"That's right—laugh—laugh—laugh—laugh your goddamned lungs out! Ahahahaha!"

Clapping, the man rhythmically kicked at his subordinate.

Everyone around them gulped as they watched.

The boss seemed to grow bored of kicking. He took a seat again and flashed a smile at the fallen subordinate.

"There's still almost 20 men you have to account for. I'm waiting for the rest of the report."

"Ugh...gah..."

"I can't hear you. Speak up—you know I hate wasting time."

"Agh..."

Though the subordinate had lost several teeth and his nose was spewing blood, he sensed the bloodlust in the boss's voice and forced out a trembling voice.

"Wh-when I heard we lost 10...I s-sent in the rest. But..."

"But'. I'm not sure I like that word. Excuses don't suit us champions of justice, do they?"



"Champions of justice?"

"Yeah. C'mon, the West has gotta have figured out *something* about the kind of people our busy killer-kidnapper buddies here are going after," Inui snickered. Kugi furrowed his brow.

"We know already. And the answer is boring: they go after 'bad guys'."

"Boring, yeah. But true. Half the island's pulled *something* on the mainland. You can kill anybody and you'd have a 50-50 chance of being a hero."

"Then I suppose it makes sense for them to target you first," Kugi said snidely, but Inui chuckled.

"Yeah. Anyway, these are some simple people we're dealing with here. They wanna kill bad guys. That's the big premise here. But to these guys, just being on the island qualifies you for villain status...or something like that. But seriously, quit wasting time with *me*. Ask or torture or interrogate or brainwash or seduce the answers outta whoever's still breathing here. Though if Yili's the one doing the seducing, I'd be first in line for tickets."

Though Inui had said absolutely nothing useful, Kugi continued his questioning without cutting in.

"What do you have that these people want?"

"...Say, who d'you think *made* our champions of justice the champions they are?"

"I'll shoot you if you say it was God or the collective unconscious."

"Naw, not that kinda crap." Inui leaned against a nearby wall and dramatically spread his arms. "The audience."

"What?"

"If you work for the world or humanity or shit like that but nobody recognizes you for it, you're just a good person. Respectable, sure, but no one's gonna call you a champion of justice if nobody notices you."

"I don't get it. That's nothing unusual in comic books and movies."

The battles of lonely, unsung heroes were so commonplace in fiction they were practically the stuff of stereotype. But Inui snickered condescendingly and continued.

"In comic books and movies, you've got an audience—the readers and viewers. That's acknowledging the heroes' champion status. The audience notices and calls them heroes."

"What are you driving at?" Kugi asked, his tone growing tense. Inui replied emphatically.

"The info I got? It's the audience list! The people who're watching the blood-pumping show! They can get a cathartic rush from seeing bad guys on the show get owned! The title's gotta be something like 'Super Torment Squad S vs. the Island of Evil'!" Inui clenched his fists, gesturing dramatically. "And wouldn't you believe it? They've got an audience of thousands for this uber-limited no-noobs-allowed show! Episode: The Bad Guys Cry for Mercy! ...Part 3!"

"You're making no sense," Kugi said in as cold a voice as possible, looking down. He had realized that Inui was already lost in his own world. "This isn't even entertaining."

Inui took a moment to reflect on his words from a more grounded perspective.

He blushed slightly and cleared his throat.

"Ahem. In other words, I've got data that proves that these goons were killing people on the island."

"Should've said that from the start."

"That's no fun." Inui shrugged, looking Kugi in the eye again. "I'm repeating myself here, but this has got to be the first time we talked normally like this, right? Till now, we've been shooting away at one another like no tomorrow."

"...Yeah."

"Maybe if we'd met in different circumstances, we might have been BFFs!"

"...Yeah."

Inui whistled, not expecting such an answer, and brought up a suggestion he had almost given up on.

"So whaddaya say to going on a pirate adven-"

"No."

"Shit, at least let me finish!" Inui cried, slapping his forehead. But he still grinned. "That's just like you. Your characterization, I guess."

With an impish grin, he turned his back on Kugi.

"See you around. Call me if you can't squeeze the answers outta these goons. And tell the Western District I'm willing to negotiate for a price on this info I've got."

Silent and never once showing a hint of emotion, Kugi watched the other dog leave.



Several minutes later, in front of the fountain.

"A TV, huh. Wonder if they'd play some movies on this thing."

Having left Kugi, Inui walked around the island to enjoy a moment of peace.

He wandered into the indoor square in the mall that stood between the two districts.

Before the fountain that stood as a symbol of the mall was a recently-installed TV. But it was currently turned off.

Perhaps that was why no one was around, save for a few vagrants lying in a corner of the square.

Inui approached the TV and recalled his earlier encounter.

"Heh. Knew they'd come up, but not this quickly."

And he thought about the surprisingly normal conversation he'd held as he mumbled to himself.

"Gotta say, I didn't think Kugi'd be chill enough to let me leave..."

At that moment, he saw the world reflected in the TV.

On the black screen was his own rainbow hair—

And a veritable shadow of a man approaching behind him.

"Psych! Knew it!"

He simultaneously turned and leaned back.

At the same time, a metallic heel passed where his head had been a second earlier.

"Whoa!" Inui cheered when he saw Kugi flying through the air in an unusual roundhouse kick. "Now that's what I'm talking about!"

In stark contrast to Inui's enthusiasm, Kugi was as stoic as ever. He said only what was necessary.

"Hand over the data. The Western District will take care of the rest."

Kugi must have left the questioning to his friends in black. Inui could say with confidence that the usual Kugi never would have chased him down alone to pick a fight.

That action spoke for the unspeakable enmity Kugi held for Inui. An enmity that surpassed all reason and emotion. Inui, knowing that, embraced the challenge.

"Sorry, but the Eastern District's placed a pretty high bid on this baby. If you want it, you're gonna have to talk to Gitarin."

"I don't intend to buy the info. I just have to take it by force."

Kugi kicked the ground with the tip of his right shoe. A short blade popped out of the end.

"Wait! Hold it! Where'd you get those shoes?! Don't tell me you *made* 'em?"

Ignoring Inui's question, Kugi kicked straight at his enemy's neck.

Inui narrowly avoided the knife and provoked him, incredibly amused.

"If you kill me, you're gonna lose that data you need! And even if you don't wanna kill me, we should still solve this peacefully! Cause we're humans, and humans are all about love and peace...so eat *this*!"

Inui kicked off of the edge of the fountain for a heel drop.

His heel grazed Kugi's coat as the latter stepped back, slicing the sturdy fabric with a loud noise.

Kugi rolled and jumped forward, kneeing Inui in the gut.

"I just have to incapacitate you and 'negotiate' until your fingers are gone."

Inui just managed to block Kugi's knee and leapt back without a second thought.

And when he heard Kugi's threat, he decided to chat in the middle of their battle.

"Whoa, talk about freaky. Come to think of it, that happened in real life a while back. Somebody kidnaps a girl and sends her fingers to her parents... so you're one of *those* people?"

Inui dodged a flurry of kicks as he pressed a metaphorical trauma switch.

"So you're the type who likes killing little girls! Just like the childhood friend you shot."

It was a painful jab.

If Kugi were the person he had been a few years ago, he would have flown into a rage.

But he was immune to such provocation now.

His face twitched, but not enough to alter his expression.

He simply continued to alternate between trying to strike and cut Inui.

Inui evaded the attacks with ease, keeping a close eye on his foe's movements.

And in the span of a second, he lashed out with a roundhouse kick. Kugi blocked it; but the trick was enough to separate them.

Rather than catch his breath, the mad dog asked a question.

"Not gonna use your gun?"

There was a fair distance between them.

Whoever drew first could kill the other with ease.

But neither dog even tried.

"You had time to change magazines. You had time to grab a gun from one of the goons. But you're not using a gun."

"..."

"Is it cause you don't wanna risk killing me? No. This might be a buffer zone, but the Western District's stronger here. Even if you used a suppressor there's enough people around that *someone*'s gonna hear it. And once they report the gunshot, you're finished. And the Buruburu lady passes by here all the time. In other words—"

"Yes," Kugi said before Inui could even finish, "Guard Team aside, Kuzuhara would be a pain to deal with."

"Look at you! Getting more honest by the day." Inui grinned, cracking his neck.

Kugi took a stance, ready to counter—

But at that moment, countless footsteps surrounded the fountain.

That was followed by a gunshot, but naturally, neither dog had even drawn his gun.

"Don't move!"

They turned to find about 20 goons dressed like the ones from before, surrounding them with guns at the ready. The man at the center of the group was holding a smoking handgun, which he seemed to have shot at the air as a threat.

"More? We're a couple months too early for field trip season," Inui snickered. Kugi silently observed his surroundings.

The man at the center of the group took aim at the dogs and clicked his tongue.

"Pieces of shit. You're gonna be screaming for momma before I'm done with you."

"Pfft. You're sounding like a third-rate villain." Inui smirked. The man grew noticeably impatient.

"Shit must be leaking outta your brains if you don't get what we're gonna—"

"That's my line." Inui sighed, and grinned. "You don't know what opening fire here *means*."

"What?!"

"You just might get lucky enough to see the legendary superhero of the island personally blocking bullets with his bare—"

But Inui was cut off by a sudden noise.

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRM.

The distinctive roar of engines.

"Huh...?"

It sounded like the growl of a predator. Inui's eyes widened, but he quickly turned to Kugi and said under his breath,

"That was fast."



As if on cue, the fountain area greeted a new player.

A fierce but lovely kitten wielding a pair of massive claws.



Inside a certain warehouse.

"...So the women charged in and took out the rest...and then these men in black and another gang beat the team to a pulp..."

"...Women?"

"Y-yeah. First it was a girl holding a chainsaw in each hand—apparently moved like lightning—and then it was a woman with a katana, and a girl who said she was a detective..."

The man reporting to the boss was already lost in despair.

His eyes were brimming with frustrated surrender. The boss noted the emotion and chuckled.

"Hah hah hah..."

"Agh..."

The subordinate froze, remembering what had happened just earlier.

But a second later, an old-fashioned ringtone sounded from the boss's breast pocket.

The boss hadn't replaced the default ringtone on his phone. He pulled it out and pressed the call button, withdrawing his smile.

"Hello. ...Yes. Yes..."

The subordinate breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that someone had called, and at the fact that the boss had taken the call.

The other subordinates must have felt the same, but nevertheless no one would want to be in his shoes. The tension remained in the air, continuing to wrap around them.

"Of course. I will."

Several minutes later, the boss hung up and slipped the phone back into his pocket.

Then, he sighed loudly.

"The audience wants another round of 'justice,'" the boss said with a hint of respect, standing from his chair. Then he looked over his subordinates.
"Forget Inui. We need to get to work."

"B-but boss! We can't pull this on the island now!"

"We're not doing this on the island."

"Huh?"

They must have been talking about some job, but there seemed to be a misunderstanding between the boss and the subordinate.

"We're doing the job here. In the basement. Doesn't matter if it's a bad guy or not. This time, we're going to listen to our *audience*—bring in a woman or a kid. Doesn't matter who."

"But boss, isn't that a bit much?" One of the subordinates interjected with a frown. He knew what the 'job' entailed. "Women, maybe, what are we going to blame a kid for?"

"We'll figure something out. The audience knows anyway. They always have. Our audience treats us like champions of justice, knowing the subjects aren't really villains."

The boss grinned, then, and gave his orders.

"Contact our insider by boat. Come straight here tomorrow once you find an easy target. And don't touch the 'tourists'. Even if we talk our way out of a police investigation, the audience isn't gonna like it."

"R-right, boss."

"Right. Once we bring the target to the mainland, we win. Doesn't matter if Inui or some other freakshow tries to pull something...they can't do shit off the island."

-Continued in Episode 5-



チュウチュウ
第四話 『唇×唇』

Episode 4: Lips x Lips

The Case of Jun Sahara - 1

The theme park office in the Eastern District.

"What is it that the Eastern District lacks? Love!"

A cry of romance echoed through the lonely theme park.

"...Don't you agree, friends? I think this is the perfect opportunity for a mass confession. Let's get started!"

The suggestion—accompanied by a clap—came from the most laid-back and scheming busybody in the Eastern District.

The Guard Team members gathered in the room responded to their boss's proposal with a resounding silence.

"Poor boss...he's finally lost his mind..." Carlos finally spoke, shaking his head. Zhang offered a pointed correction.

"He lost his mind *years* ago."

"We lack *love*? Says the guy who walks around with a hot babe on each arm..."

"Boss, reciting pi should help you get your mind back in order. Let's start with 3.1415."

"Who cares about the digits? Three is more than enough."

"Impossible! 3 times the diameter isn't a circle—it's a hexagon! Here, I'll show you. ...Now, a hexagon is a collection of six equilateral triangles with each side equal to the length of the radius. So in the end, it fits right into a circle with the same radius!" The man explained, taking care to draw diagrams on the office whiteboard. The other members nodded in understanding.

"I see. So that's why pi is bigger than 3."

"Aha!"

"Who's the idiot who said 3 was enough?"

"You don't even need to learn the digits—we can just call it π !"

As the conversation degenerated, the man at the head of the group frowned.

"Ahem... Team? Why are you more engrossed by pi than my opinions?"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist. We'll pretend we didn't hear any of your stupidity." Said Greatest Zhang, the underground pro wrestling champion. He cracked his joints menacingly as he slowly stood. "Local punks have been going missing or getting brutalized recently. And of all things, you're saying we're lacking *love*?!"

"...Uh. Well..."

"*Vigilance*, am I right? You were going to say we lack *vigilance*. My ears've been going recently, boss. I thought I heard you say we lacked *love*. Almost snapped off your cheekbones there, jackass."

Zhang approached the boss, looking ready to snap his spine more than his cheekbones. Gitarin nervously averted his gaze.

"I question the use of the word 'jackass' in the same breath as the word 'boss'. And the...uhh...*vivid* imagery of snapping my cheekbones is also a minus in my book for the terror factor. I think you lack any sort of love or respect for your superior."

"Fuckingsonovasoccerjackass—"

"Hey, that's an insult to soccer loveeeeeeeeers?!"

Zhang strung up Gitarin in a Neck Hanging Tree.

"You're supposed to be a *mob boss*, goddammit—what kinda gangster goes around saying we need more *love*?!"

"Heh...heh heh... Every villain who underestimates the power of love is doomed to die by love. That is the unspoken rule of the world, and I don't want to die yet! Therefore, the rabble gathered on this island should work

together for looooooooooooo— I thought you were gonna let me go that was pretty cool right—”

“It’s people like you who turn into dictators who wage wars over women. So I think this is a good time for you to die. You can apologize to your future victims in the afterlife.”

“Grrrrk! I—can’t—breathe—uncle—uncle!”

The two women who were supposedly his lovers watched their boss turn blue and giggled.

“Don’t just stand there and watch—aaaaaargh—”

But the Guard Team ignored the everyday scene and chattered as they always did.

“Let’s get to work.”

“Uh-oh. Mr. Take sent a message asking for us to pay off our tab.”

“He’s gonna throw his knife at us if we go in without money again.”

“...zzz...”

“Ahahaha! Mr. Gitarin? Love? Hah hah hah hah! That’s crazy! Hee hee hee hee hee heehahahahahahaha! Ahahahahahahaha! This is a riot! I’m dying here!”

“A little late for that reaction.”

“Apparently Inui’s going crazy again.”

“Against a bunch of newbies from the mainland. He’s got this.”

“Mainlanders? Let him kill ‘em.”

“That’s scary, Mr. Gen.”

“Nothing good comes of messing with mainland gangs.”

The conversation shifted topics, slowly erasing the boss’s foolishness from their memories—

"S-sorry I'm late!"

The door opened and someone stepped inside.

She was a sweet-looking young woman whose bangs covered her eyes.

She had fair white skin, but her long, slender arms did not look particularly frail. She wore a stylish leather suit jacket and pants, along with a light T-shirt. Because the jacket was worn open, hints of her attractive curves were exposed to the world.

"Ah, Jun! Perfect timing!"

Gitarin's eye glinted as though he had been rescued by an angel. He squirmed out of Zhang's grip and hid himself behind his lovers before addressing the woman with hidden eyes—the captain of the Guard Team.

"Listen here, Jun! These people have been just terrible today. They surrounded me and took out a bunch of sporks! Tried to shove them into my eye sockets and *pop!* *Pop!* Can you believe this?!"

"Wh-what?! Everyone!" Jun gasped with a shudder.

"We did *not!*" Zhang replied, glaring at Gitarin. "Son of a three-legged anemone. Enough of your bullshit."

"Son of a *three-legged anemone*? ...Anyway."

Gitarin regained his composure, though he remained sheltered behind his lovers. With a relaxed expression and voice, he turned to Jun.

"I need you to take responsibility, Jun! As the captain of the Guard Team!"

"M-me?" Jun stammered.

What came next dropped her already-confused thoughts straight into a maelstrom of chaos.

"The answer is love! I need you to start loving!"

"L-love? Wha...?"

"I love you'! 'Wo ai ni'! 'Anata wo aishiteiru'! Come to think of it, the 'ai' sound is in the phrase in all three languages! That's incredible! Which is why you should confess. Perfect!"

"C-confess...?!"

Question marks popped over her head in rapid succession and disappeared.

That was when her boss made an absurd suggestion.

"I've called Inui over, so confess your love to him."



The Case of the Detective Siblings - 1

The Private Eye Lizard, a detective agency in the Western District.

The office was in an abandoned hotel in the Western District.

At the door of a certain hotel room was a sign depicting a chubby lizard that resembled a *tsuchinoko* with adorable round eyes. It was a poor fit for the artificial island, where criminals and outlaws roamed free. Then again, the agency itself—a forcibly renovated hotel room—was no better a match for the world around it.

A detective agency.

The hotel room had all the hallmarks of a detective agency, and then some.

Before the window on one of the walls was an old wooden desk and a leather armchair. In front of that was a sofa for clients and a glass coffee table, complete with ashtray. On the desk was a huge mess of documents, but most of the papers were suspicious flyers handed out on the island or leaflets advertising strange religious groups.

The room was practically built for a detective deducing his way through the island.

But unfortunately, the owner of the room barely qualified as a detective.

"Did you hear the radio broadcast, Sherlock Liverpool? A communal TV! I smell a case!"

A teardrop ran down Sherlock's face.

"Eek! Wh-what's wrong, Sherlock Liverpool?!" Cried Charlotte Liverpool, the self-proclaimed ace detective.

As Charlotte fretted, her young brother wiped his tear with an enlightened look.

"The fact that your thought process has devolved into complete non-sequiturs...it brought me to tears. I...I'm sorry, Charlotte. I thought I knew you well. I'm so sorry."

"You're apologizing to me, Sherlock Liverpool? Now this is a mystery! Let me try and fit this into Knox's Decalogue. ...But this isn't good. There are so many Chinese people on this island that we won't get a Knox-abiding mystery novel like this! ...And come to think of it, Knox's Decalogue is copyrighted, so you'll get in trouble for reproducing it without permission. I smell a case!"

Knox's Decalogue, written by Ronald Knox, was a list of rules to abide by when writing a mystery novel. One of the rules forbade the appearance of a 'Chinaman', which was supposedly a joke on his part that assumed Chinese people had magical powers.

But naturally, the decalogue had nothing to do with the communal TV or Sherlock's tears.

"Wait a second. I'm not trying to write a mystery novel, am I? So where did I get Knox from? This is a mystery!"

"You're hopeless, Charlotte. You always have been, and you always will be."

After several minutes wiping his tears, Sherlock turned to his sister with his enlightened look.

"...So why do you smell a case from the communal TV? You're not mistaking the smell of dust for mystery, are you?"

"Ever the comedian, Sherlock Liverpool. Dust doesn't smell like...wait, does dust smell?"

"So what's this about a case?" Sherlock said with an angelic smile, giving up on pointing out Charlotte's contradictions.

"Umm... Oh! The communal TV! In Japan, it was supposedly popular in the aftermath of World War II! The Showa era! The Showa era isn't far from the Taisho era. And when you think Taisho, you think of the novelist Rampo Edogawa... and Kogoro Akechi, the ace detective! In other words, I smell a case in the Taisho era! Humanity is in danger!"

"Heh... The Taisho era must be a dark age for humanity in your imagination, Charlotte..."

"And when you think 'communal TV', the first thing that comes to your mind should be 'pro wrestling'... They say a man called the Destroyer is exploring the limits of destruction. A serial destroyer enters the island! This calls for a detective!"

"I think it calls more for the police, really."

Sherlock smiled pleasantly at his sister, having left behind his sanity beyond a proverbial field of flowers. Charlotte gave him a concerned look.

"What are you saying, Sherlock Liverpool? The police would never come to the island. I hope you haven't been replaced by an impostor again—"

"Argh...no fair, Charlotte. Do you *have* to bring up that part of my life *and* come up with a clever retort at the same time?"

Veins popped over Sherlock's saintly smile, threatening to make his countenance outright demonic.

"Oh. Umm...I'm sorry, Sherlock Liverpool. Was it something I said?"

"Keep apologizing obviously like that, and my blood pressure's going to skyrocket. Tee, hee, hee." Sherlock said snidely. Charlotte felt a chill run down her spine—

But at that moment, the phone rang.

A distinctive sound rang from the old-fashioned rotary phone.

The phone was actually a joke item with real buttons and an LCD screen on the receiver, but ever since the siblings got a hold of it Charlotte had been enjoying her even more 'authentic' detective life to the fullest.

The telephone was also a prop of sorts for her role, but the sight of the phone often led clients to doubt her more than anything.

"Yes, hello? Thank you for calling Private Eye Lizard!"

Something was awkward about the greeting, but the client on the other end explained their situation anyway.

Charlotte nodded along affably. But Sherlock was struck by a sudden chill.

The only thing that would get her so pumped up was a new case.

Not many people came to their dubious little detective office, especially as money was crucial to survival on the island. So though a new job should have been cause for celebration, it only made Sherlock anxious.

Doing detective work on the island meant exposing themselves to danger.

In the past, doing an investigation made his heart feel like it would explode. But after a certain incident several months ago, he had come to trust his sister to a certain degree.

But that didn't mean his fears were completely erased.

Sherlock wondered what commotion they would be embroiled in today. Charlotte, brimming with hope and pride, hung up.

"Heh heh heh...I've done it! This is incredible, Sherlock Liverpool! It was a client! A job!"

"Wow. Great." Sherlock nodded sarcastically, but on the inside he was confused and panicking about the contents of the request.

Charlotte twirled around before her brother and held her head high.

"And it's from a Western District executive! Can you believe it?"

"What?"

"The mysterious mainlanders wreaking havoc on the island must be part of a criminal organization! We must investigate them and reveal their identity to the public! That is our mission!"



The Case of Lihuang Ei - 1

A Chinese restaurant in the Western District.

<How goes the investigation, Taifei?>

The phone call came from Lihuang, the boss of the Western District. Taifei replied with the phone stuck between his shoulder and face, continuing to eat as he responded.

"Munch...pretty smoothly. We're a little low on on-site info, but if I went in person I'd get chopped up and sold to a butcher. I love eating, but I'm not too enthusiastic about being eaten. That would hurt, and being hurt would make me hungry. ...Munch..."

He heard an astonished sigh from the phone, but Taifei continued without a care.

"Anyway, I've taken some measures. You know how there are some detectives in our district? I sent them requests to look into the cases."

<...Detectives...?>

For some reason, the voice on the phone sounded flustered.

"Munch...I know you don't like relying on outside parties, but I said it was a personal request. Didn't spill a thing about the group. A good intelligence officer knows when to rely on brokers... Munch... Although it does get bothersome trying to filter all the info."

<...Which detectives did you hire?>

"Hm? Well, there were something like four of them... Ah. I hired her too. Remember the white girl who got caught up in the Ginga Kanashima mess half a year ago? She's been getting on well with Lilei recently."

<...>

"Mm...this Peking duck with curry is to die for. I thought it was just an unusual combination, but you can't judge a book by its cover! ...Hm? Hello? Hello?"

Lihuang had long since hung up. Taifei furrowed his brow.

But he was quickly distracted by the new foods served at his table. He resumed eating without a second thought.

Did Taifei realize how badly he had rattled the boss of the Western District? It was impossible to tell from the smile he wore as he dug into his food.



The Case of Nazuna Yukimura - 1

One day ago, at a martial arts dojo in the Eastern District.

There was a building in a corner of the Eastern District that was originally built as an all-in-one sports complex.

Why did an artificial island need a sports complex? No one knew, but perhaps it was meant to serve as an accessory to the small marina on the island.

In a corner of the sports complex was a martial arts dojo, complete with traditional tatami and wooden floors.

Even now, when the island was a ruin, the dojo and its rows of rooms were neat and tidy. There wasn't a patch of mold to be seen on the tatami mats.

The sun shone through the window and hit the board walls, filling the dojo with a warm but tense light.

Though it was only a part of the sports complex, the dojo was truly a home of martial arts—and it was one of the few calm places on the island.

That was when a man dressed in white—and splattered with human blood—appeared with an awkward smile.

"H-hey there. It's been a while."

When the man gave a clumsy wave, the woman standing before him—Nazuna Yukimura—sighed and smiled.

"C'mon, we just saw each other the day before yesterday."

She had short, shimmery black hair. There was a katana at her side.

That alone made her a perfect fit for the dojo.

Nazuna was a member of the Eastern District's Guard Team, but she spent most of her time off here. She had been training alone at the dojo today after work, when the man in white—Yakumo Amagiri—appeared.

In terms of appearance they had nothing in common. But they didn't seem to dislike or feel uncomfortable with each other.

Yakumo wondered what he should do, before plunking down on the floor in a corner of the dojo.

"Umm...don't mind me. Keep going."

"Are you sure? You won't get bored?"

Nazuna had been doing *iaido* practice for some time. She was worried that Yakumo would get bored watching someone as unskilled as her repeat the same motions over and over, but Yakumo shook his head rhythmically and smiled.

"Not at all. Your movements...are really amazing."

"Flattery will get you nowhere." Nazuna laughed off the embarrassing comment.

"I don't need to get anywhere. I'm still happy."

Nazuna nodded at Yakumo, who was quite removed from reality, and returned to her training.

She elegantly swung her sword, again and again. The pale young man watched innocently.

It was quiet and calm.

Watching Nazuna in the evening sun, Yakumo raised his clock speed to its limit in the hopes that the moment could last forever.

That was when loud footsteps began to rumble in the distance. Several figures appeared in the corner of his vision. Disappointed, Yakumo slowly returned to normal.

"Oh! It's Yakumo!"

"He's back!"

Bursting into the room was a group of five or six girls. Some were as young as kindergarten-aged, while others could mingle with older elementary school children. When they spotted Yakumo and Nazuna, they ran over with glinting eyes.

"Ooh, you're so lovey-dovey!"

"You should get married."

"Ask her out! Confess!"

"Kiss! Kiss!"

"Do something sexy!"

As the girls chirped and chattered, Nazuna sheathed her sword with a wry smile.

"We're not kissing yet. And Yakumo's already confessed to me."

"Y-you're *counting* that?!"

"I don't have an answer yet, though. We still don't know each other very well."

Yakumo's pale cheeks turned beet red. He rolled around the floor in embarrassment.

The girls seemed amused by his actions. They surrounded him and began showering him with requests—"Dance, Yakumo! Dance!" "Show us the robot dance!"

This time, Nazuna smiled warmly.

She hadn't regularly smiled like this until a few months ago, when Yakumo had begun visiting.

The girls at the dojo were orphans in Nazuna's care.

At first they had been wary of Yakumo. But after he showed them some of his dance moves, they quickly warmed up to him.

'Even I didn't expect him to be such a good dancer.'

'But is it really normal to be friendly with a man covered in blood?'

On one hand, Nazuna worried about Yakumo's potential influence on the girls. But she remembered that she herself was already on friendly terms with him, and reminded herself that she had no right to be worrying about the girls' moral states.

Even as she thought, the orphans busily chattered with Yakumo.

"Hey Yakumo, aren't you giving Nazuna any presents?"

"Presents..."

Yakumo trailed off, then looked up in surprise.

"Come to think of it, when is your birthday, Miss Nazuna?"

Yakumo despised himself for not asking such an important question earlier, but he did his best to not let it show.

But Nazuna's answer surprised him.

"I don't have one."

"What?"

"Well, you see...I'm an orphan, too. The person who raised me wasn't exactly the most responsible guardian. So I don't have a birthday."

Nazuna's tone was nonchalant, but the content of her words justified a full 10 seconds of thought for Yakumo. It was a short time for most, but more than several minutes for him.

It was impossible to tell what he had meditated on and at what density, but after teaching the girls a few dance moves, he slowly headed for the doors.

"I'll be going now. Can I come visit again sometime?" He asked timidly. Nazuna's response was calm.

"Sure. But don't pull something while I'm off-duty and lead Jun or Zhang to the dojo like last time. Then I'd be obligated to capture you."

"Don't worry. I'll make sure to lose them before I drop in," Yakumo replied, missing Nazuna's point. He turned.

Rather than correct him, Nazuna smiled bitterly and saw him off.

Once Yakumo was gone, the girls went up to Nazuna with mischief in their eyes.

"Hey Nazuna, do you like Yakumo?"

It was a straightforward question—perhaps too much so—but Nazuna did not seem to mind.

"Hm...I don't know. I can't say for sure yet."

"But you're almost never this friendly with a guy."

"It's true that I don't dislike him," Nazuna admitted. The girls squealed.

"Wow! What do you like about him? You never liked any guys before—how's he different?!"

"What do I like about him? ...That's a hard question to answer."

'What do I like about him?'

Until the incident half a year ago, he had simply been her enemy.

But she came to understand him over the course of the incident, and he had eventually gone from 'enemy' to 'friend'.

She sometimes heard that people turned down love confessions by asking to be friends. But when Nazuna said the same thing, she had meant it in an optimistic way.

However, she could not pinpoint exactly what about him it was that she liked.

'Saying I just do...might be a bit mean to Yakumo.'

"C'mon, Nazuna! Tell us."

The girls refused to back down. Nazuna thought seriously for some time.

And she finally gave a reply.

"...His face, maybe?"

It was an awkwardly realistic answer.

But 'awkward' was the perfect word to represent the state of their relationship.



The Case of Yakumo Amagiri - 1

Upon deliberation, I come to a conclusion.

I'll give her a gift.

Tomorrow, I'll give her a birthday present.

Then I'll say this.

I'm giving you the gift of a birthday. Today is your birthday. Congratulations.
Happy birthday. Happy birthday. Mayday. Mayday.

...Perfect!

...Wait, what does 'mayday' mean again?

I'm pretty sure you say it to congratulate someone.

Now, I'm giving her the gift of a birthday to show her my love, but what
should I give her as a birthday present?

What do you normally give someone on their birthday?

Clothes, maybe. But all the clothes on this island are pretty much the same.

When in doubt, ask someone.

I could consult my nap friend Lilei, but she lost a friend a few days ago. It
would be rude to ask her something like this while she's still in mourning.

Come to think of it, the reason I rushed to see Miss Nazuna in the first place
was because I heard Fei was murdered. I was afraid for Miss Nazuna.

Miss Nazuna is strong, but just in case.

I may be the Killer Ghoul, but I was gripped by a sense of loss when I was faced with the death of someone I knew—even if I hadn't known her for long.

I was scared of what might happen if Miss Nazuna was put in the same situation.

I was terrified.

And I was reminded of this:

I love Miss Nazuna. This is a reality, truth, and fact all in one.

So I want to choose her birthday present with the utmost care. Who can I ask for help?

I think to myself as I climb down from my napping spot. Then I spot a strange man loitering in front of the building. I also spot the Iizuka kids running off. It seems like they had led the man here.

He was trying to meet Lilei, he says. It seems like he's relatively new to the island.

Perfect.

Someone who still thinks like a mainlander might know what kind of gift I should give to a girl. So I asked, and—

"I-I guess you could go for the classic. ...Maybe handmade chocolate?"

...

Handmade chocolate.

What does that mean?

Chocolates. That's Valentine's Day. I thought that was when women gave chocolates to men to confess their feelings. But wait...come to think of it, when I was a kid, there was an event where men had to give chocolates to women in return for what they got on Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day... come to think of it, I think I got about 50 chocolates the year I won that dance contest. They were delicious.

...Wait. I'm getting off-track again. Why did this man suggest giving chocolate as a birthday present? There's a mystery here—I can smell it. Damn it. If Charlotte were here, she'd deduce her way through this case with ease.

But she said she likes me. If I ask her for help, she might get the wrong idea. ...And I might end up falling for her, too. I can't do that. I am devoted to Miss Nazuna. Even if she's not completely sure about me.

I'm getting off-track again.

Um... Where was I... Right! Valentine's Day.

Valentine's Day. Let's try to remember the meaning of the holiday.

I know it's the day that someone called Saint Valentine died. Saint Valentine ignored the king's orders and blessed marriages, and was executed as a result. ...What an awful king. Killing someone for blessing a marriage? Maybe this king was more of a killer than I am. Now, what else about Saint Valentine? ...Wait. I get the feeling that Valentine was actually executed for doing miracles in prison or something. Healing someone's eyes... So doing miracles gets you executed too? That's not just awful, it's terrifying. So is this what a witch hunt is? In other words, the king treated Saint Valentine like a witch? But Valentine was a saint. Who does the king think he is, calling a saint a witch? ...Right. A king. But wait. Was Valentine a man or a woman? I remember they sent a letter to the last person whose eyes they healed... Why is it that I can remember trivial episodes like this and not the saint's gender? I wonder if Saint Valentine would forgive me.

Whoops. Another tangent.

So...right. A letter.

Saint Valentine sent a letter.

A love letter.

Of course. A love letter is the first gift. The beginning of a romantic relationship.

I thank the man and let him go.

What does he want with Lilei, anyway? He said something about a long-lost sister. I wonder if he was telling the truth.

Oh well. Lilei can take care of a man like that easily.

Now...I should think about what kind of a love letter would make Miss Nazuna happiest.

And what should I attach as a present? ...This is going to be a challenge.



The Case of Jun Sahara - 2

The theme park office in the Eastern District.

"What?"

Jun gaped, stunned and confused.

The Guard Team members who understood what the boss had said held their breaths, a variety of expressions on their faces.

Every member of the Guard Team knew that Jun admired Hayato Inui.

But everyone knew not to mention him in front of their timid captain. Not only that, there was no personal connection between Jun and Inui.

In other words, Jun came to admire Inui after seeing him from afar or while listening to the island's radio broadcasts. At least, that was what the Guard Team believed.

"...Huh? Wh-what? Pardon?" As the understanding dawned, Jun managed to somehow blush and pale at the same time. "Y-you mean Mr. Inui is coming here? A-and I'm supposed to confess?! Whaaaaaat? I-I don't understand, boss! What do you mean by that?"

"I've been waiting for those words! 'Rabbits die of loneliness. Men die without love. These facts cannot be scientifically proven, but can be artistically represented,' quoth Saint Jororogis III. That is what I mean."

"What? ...Umm..." Jun contemplated for a moment. Then— "I...I don't understand, boss."

Carlos chimed in with a grin.

"So who the hell is Saint Jororogis III?"

"You mean to say you don't know?! My god! And you call yourself a member of my Guard Team!" Gitarin sighed dramatically, his head in his hands. Carlos didn't even blink.

"Hey, anybody got an answer for me?"

Noting that nearly everyone in the room was shaking their head, Carlos turned to his boss with a look of mock-anguish.

"Sorry boss, it looks like none of us qualify to be part of the Guard Team. We'll just be heading out now."

"Oh. Sorry. I'm sorry. I lied. I told a teeny tiny lie. Sorry. 'Saint Jororogis III' is a nickname of mine."

"You added a 'Saint' to your own nickname?"

"Wait, *that's* what bothers you?! Anyway, forgive me. I'm sorry." The boss groveled. Jun raised her voice.

"A-anyway! Why is Mr. Inui coming?"

"Because I called him over."

"Why?!" Jun demanded, just about ready to cry. Gitarin turned his gaze to the air and lowered his voice.

"Because I want to see you overcome your fluster as you quietly confess to Inui...or is that not a good enough answer?"

"It's not just 'not good enough'! It's completely unconvincing, boss!" Jun raised her voice in a rare show of anger.

The other Guard Team members began whispering to one another, seeing the signs of entertainment about to begin.

"Oh, so Jun really is besotted with Inui?"

"Which century did you get that word from?"

"I guess I understand. I mean, she even has a Western District wanted poster of him posted on her wall."

"Oh, the one the boss doodled on?"

"But Jun and that rainbow-haired freak?"

"Ahahahaha! This is hilarious!"

"Don't be stupid, Mii. It's not nice to make fun of people in love."

"But you know, Jun had a lot of chances to meet him. Why didn't she confess earlier?"

"I-if that was physically possible for Jun, she wouldn't be agonizing in front of us now."

"Then again, Carlos goes around picking up girls in Spanish cause it sounds all exotic."

"I could switch to Japanese if you'd like."

"Hey. Forget this womanizer."

As the members chattered on and on, Jun was struck by a dizzy spell. She staggered out of the office.

"Where're you going, Jun?"

"I-I need to wash my face..."

Pale, Jun headed for the bathroom at the end of the hall. Perhaps she was too confused to even get angry.

Washing her face with cold water at the sink, Jun decided that she should cool down and get a hold of herself.

She stared at her reflection as she thought of how the conversation had gotten to that point.

"Let's see..."

First, she had to get her own feelings in order.

How did she feel about Hayato Inui?

They first met several years ago.

Back then, the island still had Northern and Southern Districts, and Jun was not yet captain of the Guard Team. It was sometime then that Gitarin warned the team to be wary of a certain individual.

"He's just a business contact. But to be honest with you, he's a bit of a loose cannon. Watch yourselves around him."

With that, he showed them a photograph of a certain young man, taken from a great distance.

Though his features were unclear, his rainbow-colored hair was easy to identify.

"You're doing business with someone that dangerous, boss?" The man who had been the Guard Team captain at the time asked.

In response, Gitarin gave them a wry grin.

"We're just exchanging information. This man essentially unified all of the Pits under his command. And after talking with him, I got a bit of a read on him. He's the same kind of guy as Mr. Gen."

"Did you call?" A middle-aged man in sunglasses responded from a corner of the room.

The man was toying with a grenade in his right hand and held a bottle in his left.

"...Right."

Listening to the exchange, Jun surmised that this Inui must be a terrifying individual.

Jun appreciated Gen as a member of the Guard Team, but she was well aware that he was impossible to control.

Supposedly it had only taken Inui a few years to bring the outlaws of the Pits under his control.

He must be someone terrifying, she thought.

And if he was as uncontrollable as Gen, it was only natural that the Guard Team be wary of him.

Jun put down the name 'Inui' and his seven-colored hair on her mental 'to-avoid list'. She decided to keep an eye out for him, with the determination that she would destroy him should he choose to act against the Eastern District or the island.

That night, with that determination fresh in her mind, she went out to sate her hunger.

She stepped into the ramen shop under her apartment and was slurping down her order of Etsusa Naval Warfare ramen—the most expensive item on the menu—when a certain encounter took place.

It was a sudden, unexpected meeting—and an absurdly improbable one, to boot.

"Hey Mr. Take."

Jun was the sole patron in the shop with only two seats.

That was when a second customer showed up and took the other seat, cheerfully greeting the owner.

Jun had just been bringing noodles to her mouth. She hunched forward slightly so as to not bother the other patron, not looking in his direction.

But never could she have expected Mr. Take's response to the new customer.

"Get out."

"?!"

"You're gonna make the lady's ramen taste stale. Go wait outside until she's done."

"Whoa! That's cruel, Mr. Take!" The man sighed, smacking his forehead.

Jun looked up at Mr. Take in confusion, but she could not read his stoic expression.

That was when the other customer spoke.

"C'mon, babe. Back me up here. Your ramen's gonna taste just fine even if I'm around, right?"

"Oh, yes! I don't mind at—"

Jun looked back reflexively as she responded—

"AAAAAHHH!"

—She burst out screaming, leaned back, and ended up falling out of her chair.

It was only natural—after all, she had just come face-to-face—almost literally—with the man from the photograph in all his rainbow-haired glory.

"Pah! What'd I tell ya? You scared her!"

"Uh, wait! Shit! No way! I...umm...sorry, did I scare you? Funny...I thought the rainbow would be a hit with the girls...makes me look like a fairy or something."

"You *want* to be popular with girls who fawn over rainbow-haired fairies?" Mr. Take growled. The rainbow-haired man raised his head proudly.

"Sure, why not? Life's long enough for all kinds of fun experiences!"

"The way you behave, I'd say you're liable to get a one-way ticket to death before the day is over."

"Well you know what? Two hours is more than enough for one movie. Long as it's dense enough, you could call it a long time," the man said with a childlike grin, then held out a hand to Jun.

"You all right, babe? Sorry for scaring you. While you're forgiving me, why don'tcha become the heroine in the movie of my life? Lulz."

"Ah—"

Jun took his hand and began to respond—

"Enough of your jokes—get outta here before the lady runs off crying!"

"Tch. Fine. I'll come back before closing time."

Before Jun could say a word, the man was gone.

Without an inkling of how much he knew about her position, Jun's first meeting with Hayato Inui ended in the span of a minute.



Time had passed since then. Now they were fully aware of each other's positions, but they had never had a chance for a proper chat. Part of that was due to Inui's year-long absence from the island.

Even now, Jun did not have her feelings completely in order.

'I admire Mr. Inui. Yeah. That much...I know.'

During a certain incident on the island, Inui had been framed and had become a wanted man across the districts.

But when Jun heard the truth about the incident from Gitarin—how Inui had not only accepted the blame but also had the audacity to use it to his advantage—she was moved. That boldness was something she lacked.

But admiration was not necessarily love.

When she consulted her friend Misaki, who worked at the casino, Misaki had replied,

"No! He's just asking for trouble, Jun! You're in enough danger as it is!"

Carlos, who happened to be there, had chuckled, *"Whoa, looks like someone's seeing green."*

"N-no! I'm not jealous! Mr. Carlos, you idio- ...Ah! EEEEEK! I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry! I lied! You're not an idiot, Mr. Carlos! I'm the idiot!"

The conversation had ended there with Misaki's panicked apologies, and Jun never got her answer.

But everyone on the Guard Team—with the obvious inclusion of Gitarin—seemed to recognize that there was an ambiguous issue between Jun and Inui that needed addressing.

'Right. I have to set things straight.

'I'm going to meet Mr. Inui...and figure out properly if I do like him or not.

'Confessing might be a bit much. But...I have to move forward...'

Being such a good-natured person, Jun decided to treat the opportunity as a gift from Gitarin.

She wondered for a moment if she should let herself move to the roar of her chainsaws, but she decided against it; it would be more meaningful to confess while in full control of her faculties.

Wiping her face with a handkerchief, Jun steeled herself and anxiously returned to the office where the others waited—with a grateful heart, just like the gentle person she was.

'Thank you, boss. Thank you for giving me a chance to finally be honest with —'

“One, two!”

“Lalalalala—lala—lalalalala—lala—”

“Bam-ba-bam—ba-bam—”

“Dadadadadatsktsksii—tsktsksii—”

“Nananananana—nananananananana—nana—nana—nanana—”

A bizarre chorus of voices greeted her when she returned to the office.

Gitarin was flourishing a conductor’s baton, and the Guard Team was singing sounds in rhythm like a group of human instruments.

It was an eerie sight.

What dazed her even more was the fact that the noise almost sounded like a coherent piece of music.

“Umm...what are you doing, boss?”

“Ah, you’re back.”

Gitarin lowered his hands, and the Guard Team went silent in unison.

As Jun watched nervously, Gitarin held his head high.

“What else? Prepping the BGM.”

"What?"

"You won't get much of an atmosphere without any music. Sorry to pop this on you so suddenly, but we need you to accept the team's collective love power and become a great skier ranking at about 700 million on the superhuman scale."

"S-superhuman scale? A skier?! I...umm...wasn't I supposed to...uh...meet Mr. Inui alone?" Jun asked, managing to form a question in the midst of her confusion.

"WHAT!?"

Gitarin was utterly baffled.

Jun nervously looked around. The Guard Team members exchanged glances.

Then they beamed and gave her a thumbs-up in unison.

"I don't understand! A-and where's Mr. Zhang?"

Zhang was usually the one to put a stop to zany schemes like this, but when Jun realized he was nowhere to be found, she became even more afraid.

"He said he was done with this and went off to eat."

"N-no way! ...Huh?"

At that point, Jun noticed the pink booklets the other Guard Team members were holding.

"...What're those?"

"Primers. The boss just handed them out."

"Primers for what?" Jun wondered, borrowing a copy from a nearby member and skimming the title.

She fell to her knees.

'The Lovey-Dovey Jun Sahara Operation! ~The roar of the engines echo through the hot spring steam. The scent of death on the Love-Love Chainsaw~'

As she dropped the booklet, Jun landed on the ground and screamed—out loud and internally.

She gaped at Gitarin, but he was already holding up a video camera and humming.

"Hm-hmhmhmh~ Lights, camera, action?"

"What?"

Held in his hand was a camcorder from the mainland. It was the latest model on the market.

"Wait! Don't shoot! Wh-why do you have a video camera running, boss?!" Jun complained, almost in tears. Gitarin flashed a confident grin.

"Hah hah hah! You're forcing my hand, Jun. Check the back of the booklet."

"The back?"

Jun scrambled to pick up the fallen booklet and scanned the back cover.

'Sponsored by Buruburu Airwaves'

"...Um...what is going on here?"

"You know, Jun. The Western District's population's surged recently thanks to the volunteer police and Kuzuhara, and because Yili is playing nice. They still charge protection fees, but it's not even the Western District's main source of income so it shouldn't be a problem in the first place."

"...Right."

"But the thing is, if we invite rich people from the mainland to our casino, all they'll see over eastside is a deserted district. And on top of that, we've got a load of dirty and not-so-dirty skeletons in our closet."

It was unusual for Gitarin to be so earnest about his position as a boss. Jun was confused, but she continued to listen.

"And so, I had an idea! What is it that the Eastern District lacks? Love!"

The Guard Team members stared at Gitarin, who had just now been discussing heavy organization politics. Jun, overwhelmed by his energy, whispered "Love..." under her breath.

"Which is why I want to announce to the island via the radio and the new communal TV at the fountain...that the Eastern District is home to an innocent and adorable girl like you, and your love!"

"B-but boss! I'm not adorable! And I'm not—"

"The Eastern District=Love! I'm going to need you to become the island's idol and draw every eye in the city!" Gitarin raved, without even waiting for Jun to retort. "According to my schedule, three minutes after your confession, you and Inui will kiss."

"W-wait a second!"

"Five minutes later, the wedding ceremony begins! This is where Inui declares, 'our love is only just beginning!'"

"That line wouldn't surprise me, but boss! A *wedding*?!"

Gitarin's enthusiastic discussion plowed forward. Jun could not respond. The other Guard Team members watched, holding their breaths, but the more impatient ones were already whispering, "Hey, can we get a bridal registry going on the island?" or "Yamato the transporter could pull it off...".

Jun wondered then if all her firsts—first confession, kiss, and even marriage—would be offered up to Inui.

How many in the Guard Team had noticed the glint in Gitarin's eye?

"And the moment they kiss, the doors open."

"—I'm not ready to get ma...what?"

"From the doors emerges...me. Holding a massive cross in my hands. Yes! A gigantic, cross-shaped chainsaw! And with this, I turn Inui to dust! Heh heh heh heh."

"Wait, boss?"

Gitarin received a sizable package from his lovers and took out a large object.

A massive, ornately decorated cross.

One side of the cross was a large blade. It was about double the thickness of Jun's chainsaw.

"What the hell is that?!" The Guard Team members cried in shock. Gitarin chuckled.

He snickered.

He laughed.

Madly, sickly.

"Heh heh heh heh heh. What do you think? I got a mainland client to get this custom-made for me. For only 7 million yen out of my own pocket!"

"Umm...boss?"

"Yes! The Love-Love Chainsaw that smells like death, which is part of the title of the script. This title was a deception on my part to make viewers believe that the chainsaw in the title is referring to Jun's weapon. But the truth is, my own chainsaw is the Love-Love Chainsaw in question!"

'*So the Love-Love Chainsaw was a proper noun...*' Everyone thought, but they all knew that there were more important things to point out.

Yet the sheer number of things that they could point out prevented any of them from breaking their silence.

"Heh heh heh... In front of thousands, I will force Inui to kiss dirt—and death."

"Boss? Snap out of it!" Jun cried, shaking Gitarin by the shoulders, but he dramatically placed his own hands on her shoulders.

"I may use you as a pawn of the Organization, Jun. But it's also true that I care for you as if you were my own daughter."

"Way to be blunt, boss."

"That's not really a problem, though." "Ahahahahaha! *Literally* a pawn?"

"Hey, maybe that's it!" "Wait, so it's not 'pawn' as in 'pawnshop'? Hah hah hah hah!"

"Then I suppose that makes me a very expensive pawn." "Go get 'em, Mr. Gen!"

"That's right...I am a *diamond* pawn!" "That just *screams* nouveau riche!"
"Go get 'em, Mr. Gen!"

Gitarin ignored the Guard Team's prattling and looked into the air dramatically.

"But even Jun, who is like a daughter to me, will someday marry and begin a new life with another. As her guardian, I wish for Jun's happiness. But to think I'll have to hand her to the mad dog... Simply put, it makes me unfathomably *jealous!*"

"*Jealous?*!" Jun cried, starting off a round of criticism.

"So *that's* the reason behind your petty hatred of Inui?!"

"*I thought* you were being pretty cold to Inui! I assumed you had a better reason!"

"Ahahahahaha! The boss is such an idiot!"

"This is about as dangerous as the twenty thousandth digit of pi."

"Zzz..."

"...I can't say I don't sympathize."

"Th-that's enough, Mr. Gen."

Gitarin continued to completely ignore the voices filling the room and continued.

"As a father figure to Jun, I want to respect her choices wherever possible. So I won't try to stop you from loving him, Jun! All I have to do is kill him, and my problems will be solved!"

"Please, boss! This just...isn't like..."

Jun remembered at that point that this was precisely the type of man Gitarin was, and corrected herself.

"No, well...this *is* like you, boss. But *killing* Mr. Inui is just...I mean, from a human perspective..."

"What are you trying to say, Jun? If you've got an opinion, speak up! Hee hee!" Gitarin grinned and hit the switch on his cross-chainsaw.

BRRRRRRRRRRRMMMMMM.

Had he forgotten in the midst of his excitement? Or had he been planning this from the very beginning?

The roar of the engine awakened a certain kitten.

The ferocious kitten that surfaced as Jun's emotional high. On its collar was the name 'Exhilaration'.

The kitten sensed the foreign engine and began to claw at Jun from the inside.

"...Heh heh... Hah hah hah hah..."

"Hm?"

Her gaze emerged from behind her bangs.

A grinning demon seemed to dance madly around Jun as her arms flew up like a pair of spring-loaded toys.

How had she pulled them out of the cases on her back? She was already holding in her hands a pair of unusual chainsaws.

"...Ahahaha!"

With a roar, Jun pulled the throttle.

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRM.

And the office was soon filled with the rumbling of three engines.



The Case of Nazuna Yukimura - 2

The entrance to the theme park.

"Okay, I admit I hit it big at the casino today. But aren't you kicking me out a couple minutes too soon?" Complained the rainbow-haired man. Nazuna sighed.

"I heard you got into a scuffle with a shady group not too long ago. We can't have them charging into the casino and causing a scene."

"It's fine. They're chumps; your usual security could hand 'em their asses on a platter."

"We'd rather avoid fighting altogether in the casino; one of the employees is the type to attract gunfire, unfortunately," Nazuna said firmly, the end of her sheath against her shoulder. "And before all that, the boss called you over. ... What in the world is going through his mind?"

"What's he want with me? 'You're startin' to be a real pain in the ass, Inui, gonna sic the Guard Team on you'? Creepy. But it actually sounds interesting, now that I imagine it."

"If the boss wanted you dead, Carlos would have put a bullet in your skull already."

"Whoa. Scary," Inui chuckled. But Nazuna knew well that he was always on guard.

Though Inui seemed simply like a flippant young man, he was a person of interest to the Eastern District. A potential threat who once ruled the Pits.

Nazuna had brought him along after her shift at the casino, but as they approached the theme park office she heard something vaguely familiar.

'Engines?'

Something squirmed in the pit of her stomach. She fixed her gaze on the office.

The roar of Jun's chainsaws, and another roar from an unfamiliar engine. And the sounds of shattering glass and something being carved away. Nazuna and Inui both heard it all.

They went around to the side entrance and opened the door, getting a good look at the commotion inside.

Surrounded by the rumbling of three engines, Jun was swinging her chainsaws in a euphoric trance. Gitarin, who was holding a massive cross-shaped chainsaw, was busy trying to avoid the swings under the protection of his two bodyguards.

In the background was Gen with a veritable armory of grenades on hand. The Guard Team members around him were desperately trying to prevent him from pulling the pins.

After a moment's silence, Inui spoke.

"Looks like they're having a blast."

"...Umm... Yeah. It looks like they'll be busy. I think you can go home for today," Nazuna said plainly. But Inui was teetering at the doorway, clenching his fists in anticipation.

"Shit! Shoulda come earlier...I have no idea what's going on now, and that means I can't jump in in the most entertaining way possible!" He hissed.

Nazuna sighed, ready to tell him to leave—

"Seriously! What. The. Hell? I've always dreamed of a scene like this! It's like the second half of 'From Dusk Till Dawn'! Dammit, now I'm itchin' for some action... Somebody tell me who I should side with for maximum cool factor!"

Inui was so excited that he was even shaking Nazuna by the shoulders.

"Wh-what?" Nazuna breathed, sensing the stress building up in her head.

Amidst the sound of engines and destruction, she wondered how she should silence the mad dog—

"What's happening here, I wonder?"

Another voice joined them from behind, turning the air to ice.

"You're not trying to do something terrible to Miss Nazuna, are you? For example...hitting on her. You couldn't be trying to do something so awful, right?"

Inui felt a chill run down his spine.

It wasn't the exhilarating rush of staring down the barrel of Kugi's gun. It was pure terror.

Realizing the identity of the man behind him, Inui turned with a shrug.

"Is this your girlfriend? Sorry, man."

'*Wait, he's not as scary as before,*' Inui thought, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief. But—

"She's my *friend*. We're starting off as *friends*."

The sense of relief was instantly shattered by the Killer Ghoul's gaze.

His eyes were clear, but endlessly dark and deep.

'*Heh. Spoke too soon.*'

"Okay, okay. I lose to the power of your friendship. You know what? Your friendly friendship moved me to the point that I think I'm gonna take off like

Melos, the symbol of friendship. Although I'm not gonna be back in three days like in the show!"

With a thumbs-up, Inui ran for his life.

A near-death experience from several years ago had flashed through his thoughts.

'Can't go dying so soon, now.'

Inui put on a wry grin when he realized that he was enjoying even the terror of death, and at the same time made sure the information in his pocket was still safe and secure.

"Grk...I want to go after him, but right now Miss Nazuna comes first."

When the dog leapt over the theme park wall and disappeared from sight, the Killer Ghoul flinched and turned back to Nazuna.

"W-w-wait, Miss Nazuna. I know I said 'right now', but...I lied. Actually...I always...um..."

"Don't worry about it. What are you doing all the way here, anyway? If Zhang catches you, there's going to be a big commotion."

"Y-yeah."

The Killer Ghoul—Yakumo Amagiri—shyly averted his gaze and put on a dark smile.

"Miss Nazuna... Today, you are going to be born anew. Bwa hah hah."

There was a moment of silence. Several seconds passed before Nazuna finally broke the ice.

"...Why do I get the feeling I'm about to be murdered or imprisoned and my hands and feet hacked off?"

"...I think I messed up."

"I know. Don't worry about it," Nazuna said, having come to understand Yakumo's personality more in the past few months. "So, what is it?"

Yakumo looked around nervously before handing her an envelope.

"Umm... So. Well... Happy birthday, Miss Nazuna."

"Huh?"

"I'm giving you a present. A birthday. So your birthday is today... Hmm... Maybe I should have picked a special day instead? I can wait for a day you like, if you want."

"..."

"So my normal gift is a birthday. And that letter is your birthday gift... It's complicated, but congratulations."

At first, Nazuna did not understand.

But she remembered the conversation from the other day. Nazuna recovered from her surprise and held up the envelope.

"Can I open it?"

"Sure."

Yakumo nodded. Nazuna pulled out the contents of the envelope. It must have been a rather rushed job, as the envelope was not even sealed.

On the letter was a simple handwritten sentence.

'I would like to confess my love to you, so please come out to the TV at the fountain square tonight at 12.'

Silence fell over them again.

But this time, it meant something different to Nazuna.

Yakumo looked nervous, as though he had crossed a line he should not have crossed. Nazuna looked him in the eye.

"A birthday, huh," she whispered to break the silence, "do you think...I deserve to have a day to celebrate? Just like other people?"

"Of course."

"Remember what I said before? About how I killed people on the boss's orders?"

"..."

"The girls at the dojo seem like they know what I've done. But none of them will mention it."

A dark look came over Nazuna's face.

It was a look of surrender. An expression so subdued for a realization that it almost seemed like self-loathing.

"I want to tell you. ...Some of those girls—I'm the one who killed—"

But Yakumo cut her off.

"No."

"What?"

"I understand what you're trying to say. But...that's not something you should tell me yet. Because we don't know each other well enough."

There was an unusually grave look in his eyes.

Though Yakumo was always serious, his gaze had never been so strong.

"So...I'd be happy if you'd tell me *after* we start dating—once I understand you better and I can be your pillar of support."

Nazuna almost fell into silence for the third time.

But she grinned and raised her head.

"I see. You're right. Sorry for trying to vent," Nazuna said with her usual confidence. And she looked at Yakumo's letter with a hint of a smile. "But you know...you already confessed."

"...I guess you could say that."

"You could have just honestly said you wanted to go on a date."

"Actually, I wanted to enclose a present with the letter. But I couldn't think of anything."

Such a way of thinking was very much like Yakumo. Nazuna understood.

"You're giving me so many presents."

"So I decided that my present will be me."

"..."

"Tonight, I'm going to go wherever you want to go, and help you with anything you need. I haven't really decided on a time limit...but I guess until you're satisfied, Miss Nazuna."

He was practically forcing his presence onto her.

It sounded almost like what a stalker would say, but Yakumo had no malicious or benevolent intentions. If Nazuna refused, he would simply apologize.

But Nazuna understood his twisted sense of innocence. So she repeated herself.

"You could have just honestly said you wanted to go on a date."

Setting aside her past and her reality, she simply flashed Yakumo a smile.

"All right. I have tomorrow off, so we can have fun until morning."

"...!!!"

Yakumo felt as though he had been jolted.

The Killer Ghoul raised his clock speed to the limit and lengthened out several seconds of time to near-infinity. And he carved that moment of joy into the eternity in his heart.

Engines were still roaring in the background.

In a setting very, very far from romance,

One man found euphoria,

And one woman found a small happiness.

And the slightest hint of sweetness filled the island's air.



The Case of the Detective Siblings - 2

Night had fallen on the island, but a head of sunshine gold bobbed along the back alleys of the Western District.

This particular area was quite close to the Eastern District border, which meant the volunteer police did not patrol it as much. Supposedly the Chinese mafia that ruled the district guarded the area instead, but they never surfaced unless necessary.

It was a setting both dull and eerie. But the one who wore that head of golden hair declared confidently to the black-haired brother walking behind her—

“Now we begin to tail the suspect, Sherlock Liverpool!”

“We don’t even have a suspect to tail, Charlotte. Let’s go home already.”

“What? But our tailing is only just beginning!”

“Where’d you pick up *that* phrase?”

Whether or not she’d heard her brother’s resigned sigh, Charlotte squeaked energetically.

"Not only that, we received that anonymous phone call!"

"Huh? ...Oh, right. The one after the client. You were finished with that one pretty quick. What did they say?"

"Would you believe it, Sherlock Liverpool? He simply said, 'drop this case if you value your life'! Then he hung up!"

"All right. I'm with our anonymous caller," Sherlock declared. He took Charlotte's hand and turned to leave.

"W-wait, Sherlock Liverpool! Cases don't happen at home! They happen on the scene!"

"The biggest case in my life is the case of whatever is going on in your head, Charlotte."

But at that moment, Sherlock's keen senses seemed to catch something. He stopped without thinking and covered Charlotte's mouth.

"Mmph?"

"Quiet."

He pulled her into an alleyway—

And spotted a group of men hurrying over.

They quickly passed by the Liverpool siblings, who stood holding their breaths.

"Which way?"

"The fountain square."

"We'll take him down."

It was clear from their voices and eyes that they were ready to kill.

Sherlock was anxiously holding Charlotte against himself, but once the men were gone he felt a different sort of anxiety.

"S-Sorry, Charlotte. Are you all right?" He asked, quickly letting go of her.

Charlotte didn't seem at all affected by the embrace. She looked in the direction the men had gone, as enthusiastic as ever.

"I smell a case!"

"I do too. So let's get out of here!"

"No! If a detective *knows* a case is going to happen, it is her sworn duty to stop it. A detective shouldn't be praised for solving a case if she knew beforehand that it would happen!"

The glint in her eye was already rushing off after the men.

But Sherlock—though he couldn't help himself sighing—tried to stop her.

"Look, Charlotte. I know I've been lecturing you about this forever, but...isn't there anyone you love?"

"W-where did that come from, Sherlock Liverpool?! I...I did sometimes and didn't sometimes..." Charlotte stammered, turning red. But Sherlock continued gravely.

"Then suppose there's someone who loves you just as much as you love him. How do you think he'd feel if you threw yourself in harm's way and died or got hurt?"

Charlotte was quiet. For some reason, Sherlock felt guilt weighing on his heart.

But he had to be blunt. He could not sugarcoat things. That was when Charlotte broke her silence.

"Sherlock Liverpool."

"Wha- yeah? Do you understand?"

"Thank you for reminding me. When I thought about all the people who love me and the people I love...I realized that I must press forward after all."

"Why?!"

Charlotte smiled, a little bittersweetly. Sherlock had known her long enough to understand how she felt, but he did not want to acknowledge it.

"Because...I love this island and the people on it."

It was Sherlock's turn to be silent.

Then, Charlotte landed the final blow.

"I care about the people here just as much as you care for me, Sherlock Liverpool."

'Charlotte.'

Without a hint of an ulterior motive, she cut to his very heart.

'Charlotte...you *really* are cruel.' He thought to himself.

How many times had they repeated this exchange since they arrived on the island?

'Thirty-five times.'

The fact that he remembered meant that he had been keeping track.

Yet each time, the fire in his heart remained unchanged.

Sherlock reminded himself—

That he was a hopeless fool, that his sister was innocent but cruel,

And that, being the fool he was, he loved that cruel sister of his.



The Case of Lihuang Ei - 2

In a dark room.

Looking over the island at night, Lihuang Ei lost himself in the past.

He had thought that he was only ever permitted to breathe an air damp with the scent of blood.

For as long as he could remember, he had been raised as a potential organization executive. He had never set foot in a school, raised only in the closed world of the Ei family.

When he came to the island, he thought that he had finally stepped into a new world. But nothing had changed. The island was even cruder than the Ei family. The air itself was hopeless.

'That's right. This is the only air I need.'

He realized that fact at a young age.

No matter how strong he became, so long as he was raised in a world like this he would inevitably end up throwing himself into an even bloodier world.

And if he ran, he would be pursued as a traitor.

But he never even wanted to consider that option.

In that world, there was only one person who possessed a different 'color'.

The blue-eyed woman. Yili and Lilei's mother.

Supposedly she was a mistress of his father's from England. She had been kicked out of the house immediately after giving birth to Yili.

Though Lihuang's memories of her were hazy, he remembered that in the air of the Ei family, she alone was kind. She had tried to be like a mother to Lihuang, who had lost his own much earlier.

Lihuang could not bear that fact.

Though he was only a child, it had bothered him that someone 'different' was being so kind to him. He had feared that, if he let himself be colored by the air around her, he would be cast away from his father and his world.

So when the woman disappeared, he had breathed a sigh of relief.

Or at least, he thought he had.

Even when he heard several years later that she had died, and when he heard that Yili's sister was on the island, it simply bothered him—and nothing else.

But the arrival of Lilei—a girl who had absolutely no regard for the air around him—and his meeting half a year prior with a certain young woman slowly but dramatically began to change his life.

And because he had no idea if the change was positive or negative, Lihuang resolved to quietly accept it. Until the day he found his answer.

When he boarded the car in the hotel's underground parking lot alongside his bodyguards, his cell phone began to vibrate.

<Hey, about that gang from before. It looks like they're fighting Kugi in the Eastern District... Munch.>

Taifei was reporting in, as relaxed as ever.

"I see. We're on our way."

"In person? ...You never did mind getting your hands dirty. Munch... You're the boss now, so hold yourself back—is what I'd say out of principle. But I'm letting you go because I'm curious—are you hoping to die in battle? Do you just enjoy these things like the elders do? Or do you not think at all about these things, just like Lilei?>

"It doesn't matter. This island's small enough that where I go doesn't affect things in the slightest. ...And are you *worrying* about me? That's not like you at all, Taifei."

<If I were worried about you, I would have been nicer about it. ...Munch... By the way, I noticed something interesting on the security feed.>

"What?"

<The detective... Munch... You know, the blond one.>

"...! I see. I pray she isn't caught in the crossfire."

<Hm? So Yili was right about you and the girl?>

"Don't make me laugh. That woman's very presence screams that the Western District is hospitable even for the most brainless of fools. If we lost her, it would affect morale among the volunteer police and the residents."

<And that's why you went to the trouble of calling her 'anonymously' just now?>

"...! Taifei! You bastard..."

<I recall teaching you how to make untraceable phone calls. You must have been pretty desperate if you even forgot that. I'll take this secret to the grave, of course, but I think people should be free to date whoever they want. And you know, that girl's a dead ringer for Yili and Lilei's—>

Lihuang hung up. He struggled to regain his composure before commenting loudly enough for his bodyguards to hear.

"...Asking for a dozen new restaurants at the hotel...the nerve of that bastard."

After lying through his teeth, Lihuang put on a fake smile and quietly fell into thought.

The bodyguards all knew that Lihuang was lying, and that he had—without realizing—begun to obsess over the blond girl from several months earlier. But they remained silent. Without a hint of derision or laughter, as though declaring that they were loyal to their boss no matter his choices.

Though it was unclear if he was aware of his subordinates' consideration, Lihuang fell into thought.

'Taifei...one of these days, I am going to wring the fat out of him.

'But his intelligence is too crucial to lose...I can't turn him against me.

'And not only that...he thinks I am free to court anyone. Foolishness.'

At that point, a question rose to his mind.

Perhaps he had held some admiration for Yili and Lilei's western mother.

And that perhaps he felt the same way towards the blue-eyed detective, who also refused to blend into the hostile air around herself.

'Impossible.'

'A girl like her?'

'...What does it matter?'

'Women mean little to me.'

'It does not matter whom I love. Not in the least.'

Lihuang's expression did not budge as he departed for the battlefield to put his life on the line.

—So the innocent smile playing at the corner of his lips also remained.



The Case of Everyone

Somewhere in the Eastern District.

About 20 minutes before the detective siblings spotted the suspicious men—

"Ohh..."

Jun breathed a heavy sigh as she walked down the alley in the middle of the night.

Only when all three chainsaws had run out of fuel did she realize the state of the office.

Miraculously, Gitarin was the only one injured in the chaos. But the room itself looked as though an alien and a predator had dueled their way through a typhoon in the office.

That was cause enough for depression, but—

"Inui? He saw the commotion here and left a while ago."

Nazuna's explanation was what upset Jun the most.

'He saw me acting like...that.'

'Of all the times for him to visit...'

Though her sense of reason had been intact, she had flown into an otherworldly rage—and Inui had seen it all. The thought gave Jun no end of embarrassment.

She did not dislike how she behaved in her chainsaw high. But of all the scenes to show Inui, it had to be the one where she was swinging her chainsaws at her own boss in the office. Anyone who saw would think she was trouble.

With a series of sighs, she walked through the island at night.

'So in the end, I never got to talk with Mr. Inui...'

'How am I supposed to face him?'

And even before the matter of the chainsaw high, Jun lived on the artificial island and loved the island itself. Did she even have the right to date people, Jun wondered.

Inui was a sort of symbol of the island. Perhaps that was why she admired him.

But that was also a problem in and of itself. Jun did not know if it was even allowed for someone like her to feel love toward a symbol of the island.

Jun wandered the streets with a heaping helping of self-hatred on her plate.

And that was when her cell phone rang.

<Ahahahaha! Hey, Jun! It's Mii! How are you? Don't feel down, okay?
Ahahaha!>

A smile rose to Jun's face at the sound of her smile-happy subordinate's voice.

<You know, you know, apparently there's a shootout going on at the building complex in the buffer zone near the Western District! You know, with Inui and Kugi, that guy from the West! Bang! Bang! Bang! Ahahahaha!>

Jun didn't understand what it was Mii found so funny, but she understood the information.

Quickly switching gears, she ran towards the scene.

But even in this new mindset, a part of her was disquieted by the promise of Inui's presence.



When his cell phone beeped, Yakumo Amagiri opened his eyes.

"...Yawn... Oh. Five minutes already? One hour to midnight...I should get going."

Getting up as though five minutes of sleep were enough for him, he crept down the side of the building so as to not wake the girl sleeping in the middle of the rooftop.

On the way, the Killer Ghoul looked up at the night sky and thought to himself.

'The stars are beautiful tonight.'

'Just gazing up like this with Miss Nazuna would be more than enough for me.'



"...Am I too early?"

Meanwhile, Nazuna Yukimura was already at the fountain.

She had never been on a date before (although she had in the past pretended to be on one for a Guard Team mission), so she did not even know how early she should be there.

She did not have to worry about the girls at the dojo, as at night she always left them to someone she trusted.

What worried her, however, was where she should suggest going that night.

'Maybe we could find a quiet place to go stargazing together?'

'Yakumo might make fun of me if I said that.'

It was a strange point of consensus. But at that point, Nazuna spotted something out of the corner of her eye.

"Huh?"

'Someone's here. ...Oh, it's Inui.'

When she saw the flash of rainbow hair, Nazuna decided for the moment to leave.

Inui hadn't noticed her yet, it seemed. And it would be best that he never did.

'If we started chatting and Yakumo showed up...this time he really might kill Inui.'



By the time Jun arrived at the building complex, a group of men were splayed out on the ground. Western District men dressed in black were rounding them up.

Realizing it would be a pain if they spotted her, Jun took cover in the distance and decided to observe for the moment—when she spotted a certain figure out of the corner of her eye.

The island's very own Killer Ghoul, whose white clothes were dyed red at the hem.

'Mr. Amagiri. What's he doing here?'

After Nazuna started contacting him, Yakumo Amagiri had caused considerably less trouble in the Eastern District. But he remained a person of interest to the Guard Team. They still worried that Yakumo might end up hurting Nazuna or worse.

'Does Mr. Amagiri have something to do with this?'

Though she was doubtful, Jun quietly followed after him.



When Lihuang arrived at the retrieval site, he personally scrutinized the bodies lying on the ground.

"Weak. You mean to tell me these *peons* are running amok on the island, doing as they please?"

He did not bother trying to hide his abhorrence, glaring at the bodies. At that moment, he spotted a kitten out of the corner of his eye.

'The kitten of the Eastern District. What is she doing here...?'

At that moment, the captain of the Guard Team took off toward the center of the island.

'Does she have something to do with this?'

Suspicious, Lihuang quietly followed after her with four bodyguards in tow.



"Maybe I'm a little early. ...Huh? What's going on over there?"

When Yakumo arrived at the fountain square, Inui and Kugi happened to be engaged in an all-out brawl.

Neither of them were using their guns, but both dogs were going out of their way to aim for each other's vitals.

Yakumo watched with disinterest and decided it would be a bother if he were to be caught up in the fray. He headed up to the second floor of the mall.

"I don't really care, but I hope they finish before midnight. I wouldn't want our date to get interrupted."

A second later—

A group of newcomers crashed into the scene, and a gunshot resounded across the square.



When Jun arrived at the square as she chased after Yakumo, she spotted Inui and Kugi, surrounded by armed men.

"?!"

She froze, but quickly regained her composure—she was the captain of the Guard Team, after all—and assessed the situation.

Inui looked as laid-back as ever.

Kugi didn't seem to have any expression to begin with.

'I have to do something...'

Quickly, she drew her chainsaws. But she stopped before she could start the engine.

Jun remembered what had happened that afternoon.

Would it really be all right for her to show something so unsightly to Inui again?

The question plagued her thoughts.

But—

Only for one tenth of a second.

If she refused to act just because she was afraid of seeming unsightly, she had no right to be the Guard Team's captain. Jun's body, thoughts, and the engine in her soul knew that fact full well.

As she moved, another question rose to her mind.

Was she, the captain of the Guard Team, justified in crashing a fight involving Inui and this unknown group?

But Jun shot down the question with a simple answer.

'Right now...I'm off-duty!'

She pulled the throttle.

She was starting the engine on her unquestionable determination.

In other words, the 'Jun' who stood amidst the roar of the engines was also unquestionably herself.

There would be no point in receiving Inui's love if she had to hide that fact about herself.

And so, allowing work to get personal, Jun let her engines roar.



BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRM.

"Jun?"

Nazuna, who had been watching the battle from the shadows, flinched at the sound of engines—and quickly spotted Jun leaping into the fray.

"...Was she tailing Inui all this time? She must really like him."

It was a misunderstanding, but not completely.

'Oh well. I have a date of my own waiting after this. I still don't know if I'll be able to love Yakumo...but I guess I should go help out Jun, for luck!'

And she burst forward.

Without a sound, concealing her every footstep—

Nazuna became a gust of wind and threw herself into battle for the most selfish of reasons.



"Miss Nazuna?!"

Yakumo, who had been watching from the second floor, screamed when he spotted Nazuna. And before he knew it, he was running.

'My god... What is Miss Nazuna doing here so early? ...Wait, did I write "11" on the letter? That's not good.'

'No. That's not the issue here. I hope Miss Nazuna doesn't get the wrong idea and think I lured her into a trap. But that's exactly what it looks like! I invite her out with a letter, and when she shows up, she sees a bunch of men armed with guns... It obviously looks like a trap!'

'Oh no. Oh no. How do I resolve this misunderstanding?'

'Aha. I get it.'

'I just have to kill them all!'

'But to be honest...I don't care if she misunderstands.'

'Even if she gets the wrong idea and ends up killing me...'

'I have to protect Miss Nazuna.'

'Because I love her.'



"Goddammit! Who are those freaks?!"

The men who were on standby outside the square began to panic.

"Nobody warned us about this... This island's full of monsters!"

"...Looks like we'll have to resort to gas," said one of the men. In his hand was an object shaped like a grenade.

It seemed to be a weapon that sprayed nerve gas into its surroundings. The man made to pull the pin—

"Hold it!"

A proud but un-intimidating voice shouted from behind them.

When the men turned, they saw an energetic young blonde who was a poor match for the island's air.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Heh heh heh... The criminal is among us!"

She was failing to read the flow. The men exchanged glances.

"...Who is this bimbo?"

"Good timing. Maybe if we take her hostage, some of those freaks inside'll stop."

The men grinned, pulling out guns from their jackets.

"So, who's guilty of what now?"

"Umm...violation of gun control laws...?"

Sherlock, who had been watching the perilous scene from the shadows, was waiting for an opportunity with a gun in hand. He was hiding opposite Charlotte, and was hidden from the men.

There were three targets.

If he did not take them out—with one shot each—he and Charlotte were both finished.

Sherlock was not a remarkably good marksman, and he was afraid he wouldn't make the shots. But time did not wait for him.

'All right. Now!'

The moment the men's eyes focused on his sister, Sherlock made to step in —

But his charge was interrupted by a man who passed by him without a sound.

"Your crime is daring to *breathe* on my island."

"What...?"

By the time the voice reached the men's ears, it was already too late.

Their hands, still wrapped around their guns, fell heavily to the ground.

Blood began spouting from their wrists—

"And your sentence...is death."

Before the men could even scream, blood gushed from their necks.

The man at the source of that violence did not even flinch. His broadsword dripping with blood, he whipped the tassel against the ground.

"It's you..."

When he heard Charlotte's voice behind him, Lihuang smiled bitterly at his own actions.

'Going out of my way to save a girl like her? It seems I still have a long way to go.'

But ultimately, he had committed murder before the girl's eyes.

It seemed that this air of blood was the only kind he was allowed to breathe after all.

'Now, scream.

'Fear me.

'Fear this island.

'On this island, there is nothing more fitting for a woman like you than the sound of wailing.'

Slowly, he turned to look at Charlotte—

When she grasped his hands and flashed him an innocent smile.

"Thank you! You rescued me!"

"Wha..."

"And you called the office this evening, too! I knew I recognized your voice! You were trying to keep us safe from harm!"

Charlotte showed no hint of fear before the blood-covered man with sharp eyes. And yet again, she destroyed the air he had built up around himself.

Lihuang had no idea how he should take that fact. In fact, he was unable to meet her gaze. He looked away awkwardly and spat,

"Don't misunderstand. It's not like I was doing this for you."

Watching everything from the back, Sherlock was struck by a certain word.

'...Tsundere...?'

But out of fear for his own life, he decided to hold his tongue.



Once she was reasonably certain that she had taken care of most of the rabble, Nazuna rushed out of the square before she was caught up in the cleanup.

A certain figure quickly caught up to her like a shadow.

Nazuna stopped once she turned into an alleyway and smiled at the pursuer in white.

"You came to help."

"Was that unnecessary? ...It must have been. I know you're strong, Miss Nazuna, so I knew you didn't really need any help...but I still wanted to lend you a hand."

Yakumo continue to ramble at length before finally concluding with, "—no, that's not what I was trying to say..." and falling into self-loathing.

Nazuna looked at him curiously, fascinated.

"Thank you," she simply said.

Yakumo's eyes shone as though that was all the reciprocation he ever needed.

Nazuna's expression returned to normal, and she asked, "so where are we off to?"

"It's up to you, Miss Nazuna."

"...Hmm...I think Mr. Iizuka from the Western District should just about be starting his night fishing session."

Nazuna called on all her knowledge about the island to think of something, and ultimately let her initial idea shine through.

"I like fishing at night, too. I'm not good at it, but maybe we can just set up a couple of poles and have a chat under the stars...or maybe that's a little boring...?"

"Not at all!"

Unusually for Yakumo, he replied without a nanosecond's thought.

It surprised Nazuna to hear such passion from him, but she grinned and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Then let's take our time."

She put on a mischievous smile.

"We've still got half an hour until you're supposed to confess to me."

What kind of a second confession did Yakumo make? And where did they go afterwards?

That is a story for another time.





The men from the mainland had all been incapacitated. The situation came to a close in less than three minutes.

'Hm? I thought I just saw Mr. Amagiri and Nazuna.'

'Wait! I can think about those two later!'

'He's here! Right before my eyes!'

'Mr. Inui is right here in front of me!'

Jun's eyes shone when she realized Inui was standing before her. She quickly composed herself.

'Yeah! I have to say it! The answer to the proposal he made on the day we met!'

"If it's all right with you, I'll be the heroine in the movie of your life!" You can do this, Jun!"

"IF-----, HEROINE-----MOVIE--!"

"What?! I can't hear you over the engines!" Inui cried. Surprised, Jun turned off her chainsaws.

And—

"Ah, that's better. So what were you trying to say?"

"Huh?! Oh...umm...I..."

'...'

"Umm... well... huh...?"

'I'm so embarrassed...'

'Confessing is embarrassing enough...but "I'll be the heroine in the movie of your life"? That's...so awkward!'

Jun's high came to an end with the roar of the engines, and she was left unable to say a word.

"You're still as funny as ever, aren't you?" Inui chuckled.

On one hand, Jun breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that Inui was not put off by her demeanor. But 'funny' was not the most encouraging thing to hear from him.

But—

"That was pretty kickass. Teach me how to use one of those chainsaws sometime?" He snickered, though it was hard to tell if he was being completely serious.

"Y-yes!"

Jun nodded firmly, and felt her heart swell.

"Whoa?! H-hey, why're you crying?"

"Ah... Hah...hahahaha! Why *am* I crying?!"

Wiping away tears of joy, Jun trembled with emotion.

Perhaps fighting alongside and being acknowledged by Inui, the man she so admired, was more meaningful than even a kiss.

Of course, she had no way of confirming that, as she had never kissed him.

If nothing else, her heart was filled with joy.

And night grew deep for many young men and women on the island.

Not even realizing they might be feeling romantic love,

They accepted the minute changes in themselves.



The next day. A medical facility in the Eastern District.

"Life is nothing without a dash of love," muttered Gitarin, lying in bed and covered in bandages.

After the commotion at the office, he had fallen and rolled with the cross-shaped chainsaw in hand and cut both of his legs.

His bodyguards had pulled him back in the nick of time, and he only suffered minor injuries. He was then moved to the organization's clinic for bed rest.

But afterwards, the Guard Team and Zhang (who had come back after a meal) came over and left him covered in more bandages than a mummy.

Following them was a long line of Eastern District executives intent on lecturing him.

His bodyguards had left to eat, and the guards were outside the door. Gitarin was alone in the stillness of his hospital room.

"...Maybe I'll watch a romance flick online," he mumbled lethargically and turned on the TV.

"What is it that people lack? Love."

He continued to prattle irresponsibly as he continued to love.

He loved his life and everything about the world—the island—around it equally.

Though twisted, he was full of love.

-Episode 4 End-



ワンワン
第五話 『I & I』

Episode 5: 1 & 1

Dispassionate text flashed across the screen.

'Charges: robbery and murder'

'In middle school, led a group of students to bully a classmate to death'

'Served only three years at a youth detention center before release'

'Three months later, committed robbery and murder and found on the run before being taken into custody'

After the flashes of text came a shot of a windowless room.

From the characteristic stains on the wall and the state of the floor, it was not difficult to tell that this was somewhere on the artificial island.

In the center of the shot was a young man, gagged and bound.

His wrists and ankles were handcuffed. He squirmed on the floor like a de-legged insect.

In his eyes was despair.

The camera slowly zoomed out. The rest of the room came into view.

A fluorescent lamp cast a cold light on the claustrophobic room.

Around the man were several figures holding metal bats and pieces of lumber.

The figures were wearing balaclavas and masks over their faces. They said absolutely nothing.

It was almost a familiar scene to any B-movie fan. But that familiarity only made it more ghastly.

The man on the floor floundered. His arms and legs swept the ground.

About 20 seconds later, one of the masked men moved.

He raised a long piece of lumber over his head. He swung.

With a bloodcurdling noise, the piece of wood—and something else—snapped.

As if on cue, the other men slowly raised their weapons.



"And that's the gist of it," Gitarin said with a smirk, pausing the video playing on the computer, "after this comes pliers, hammers, scissors, and a potato peeler, if you wanted to have a look."

"I don't feel like watching butchers at work."

The mechanical yet disgusted reply came from Greatest Zhang, a member of the Eastern District's Guard Team. Standing in a line beside him were Carlos and the other members. Gitarin, heavily bandaged and still in his bed, let go of the mouse and continued his explanation.

"This is just a recording, but sometimes they do livestreams. They stick mostly to streaming video. Also, you can't even access this stuff without a video player custom-made for the stream."

"In other words, the mainlanders are trying to make Hollywood out of the island with snuff films?"

"Yes. Although there are only 3,000 people in the audience."

The creases in Zhang's forehead grew deeper as he listened.

A series of murders and kidnappings targeting so-called 'villains' had taken place on the island recently. Gitarin had called in some of the Guard Team members, saying that he would explain the truth behind the incidents.

Many of the men who had been wreaking havoc on the island had been killed or incapacitated, and there had been a mass arrest overnight. The two districts had taken the survivors into custody.

"The Western District got most of 'em, so I only know a few details—but I got a hold of some info from the mad dog just before the confusion."

"Cutting a deal with a guy you tried to tear apart with a chainsaw? You've got guts, boss," Carlos commented.

"Heh heh heh...it's a perfect example of laughing on the outside and crying on the inside," Gitarin replied. Then he returned to his explanation.

Supposedly, this group had been a small-time organization that dealt with things like voice phishing. But as they expanded and gained more and more connections to the criminal underworld, they entered a new line of business.

Their new enterprise: claiming to be champions of justice and selling videos depicting the execution of 'villains'.

The group found snuff film lovers and people with money and power. Then they created a secret members-only club that allowed members to view the films for a steep price and the promise of protection.

It was too dangerous to be an attractive proposition—at least, from a normal perspective.

But—

"Suppose the victims in question happened to be unrepentant criminals. Fugitives on the run from society. The group executes such people in the name of justice. That pretext boosted membership exponentially. The lofty cause of 'justice' lessens the viewers' guilt. It's like illegally distributing movies online and telling yourself you're just helping to publicize the movies, in order to alleviate your guilt."

The name of justice.

Though the viewers knew that 'justice' was only a front, it was good enough to win over those teetering at the edge of morality.

"If this guy really was the piece of shit the text made him out to be, he might have deserved it. I'm not condoning this crap, but some people really might have held a grudge against this guy. ...This isn't 'social justice'—not by a long shot—but it's not something we should poke our nose into, either," Zhang growled, holding back his rage. Gitarin chuckled.

"That is, *if* the victims were villains at all."

"...So they pulled the text out of their ass?"

Gitarin nodded easily.

"The man being butchered in this video is a criminal and a 'bad guy', yes. But he's not a murderer. He was actually a shady judicial scrivener who fell into debt and went bankrupt. Another example would be...ah, yes. They introduced an old man who was quite obviously a hobo as a former politician who drove several secretaries to suicide and received 2 billion in bribes."

"They didn't give two fucks about trying to sound believable."

"But the audience pretends they're convinced. After all, the viewers aren't after justice so much as a gorefest. The audience includes people from all over the globe, not just Japan. And the list keeps growing. It must feel like you're one of the ancient Romans watching a slave warrior killing a criminal in the Coliseum."

Zhang was irritated by Gitarin's nonchalance as well, but he held himself back.

"...So now what?"

"What else? The group knows that the police won't lift a finger if the victims are all from the island. So we'll have to give them an in-depth lesson in the same. That no one will lift a finger if we kill them. Although I suppose most of them must have learned after last night's carnage."

Then, Gitarin accessed the website with the password he extracted from one of the men in their custody. Then he deciphered the encoded message on the website with the key he had received from Inui—

"...My bad," he said suddenly.

"What?"

"I thought we'd taught them their lesson, but it looks like these people aren't willing to learn."

"Hm?" Zhang frowned.

Gitarin finally withdrew his grin and muttered indifferently.

"Livestream at 3. "Exorcising" a cute girl who committed arson during a school trip and killed her classmates', it says."



The Western District. Iizuka's restaurant.

"C'mon, just lemme off the hook this one time."

"Shaddap. You're staying here till Mr. Kuzuhara gets back."

In a corner of Iizuka's restaurant was a member of the volunteer police. He was keeping watch on someone tied to a chair in the corner of the restaurant.

A mad dog with seven-colored hair.

After the battle the previous night, he had said goodbye to Jun and the others and left. For some reason, Lihuang had shown up and caught Kugi. So Inui had bolted before he could get caught up in the mess.

"Can't believe I was so distracted running that I crashed right into Mr. Kuzuhara. I'd give the scene a standing ovation if it was a movie. Too bad my hands're tied."

"Tough luck. Once Mr. Kuzuhara gets back, you're gonna spill your guts. About who you're fighting and why they're after you."

"C'mon, at least get me a lawyer. A hot, bouncy one with at least a 90 on the bust scale."

"Don't worry, we'll find you an ex-sumo wrestler."

They bantered endlessly as they waited for Kuzuhara's return. But at some point, a ringtone from a certain movie began to play from Inui's chest.

"Hey man, this might be an important one. Could you at least untie my hands?"

"No."

The volunteer police pulled the cell phone out of Inui's pocket, pressed the talk button, and stuck it between Inui's face and shoulder.

Inui shifted his neck to get a firm grip on the phone.

"Yep, hello? ...You serious?"

Inui's eyes turned to dinner plates.

He focused, trying to listen in—

"HEY! It's Kuzu's Flunky 1 and Inui!"

"You finally got caught, Inui!"

"Your luck's run out!"

"Bye-bye!"

The Iizuka children gathered around to make fun of Inui and the volunteer policeman.

Then, Ms. Iizuka came over.

"Don't bother them, kids. By the way, has anyone seen Yua?" She asked, her expression clouding.

"Nope. Haven't seen her."

"She must've gone off somewhere again."

"Yua's a strong kid." "Children are simply offspring of the wind."

The children responded all in their own ways. But Ms. Iizuka pensively turned to the volunteer policeman.

"Have you seen Yua? She's been gone since morning. She always drops in for lunch before she goes out to survey the island... I'm a little worried."

"No, I haven't seen her. But I'll make sure to ask the others," the policeman said, and turned—

The rainbow-haired dog slowly stood from his seat.

"Sorry, man."

"What...?"

Before he knew it, Inui had cut himself free.

Inui nodded apologetically—

"Something came up. I gotta head over to the mainland for a sec."

With that, he bolted past the other patrons and escaped the restaurant.

"H-hey!"

The policeman quickly realized that there was no point to chasing Inui. Instead, he grabbed his radio and broke into cold sweat.

"Shit! What am I supposed to tell Mr. Kuzuhara now?!"



The phone call had been from someone in the Eastern District.

Gitarin never normally called Inui—it seemed like he had something against him, for some reason—but this time he made an exception. A girl—or a young woman—had been kidnapped from the island, he said, and was to be executed at 3 in the afternoon.

And as it happened, it was the moment he received this information that he heard news about a girl he knew going missing.

'Fuck! I might make it if I hurry.'

Using the information he had as a basis, he ran for the mainland.

The volunteer police did not seem to be chasing him, but he kept running.

'I was gonna sit back and enjoy the show...but can't exactly do that when Yua's been kidnapped.'

Did Inui realize?

The Hayato Inui who had first arrived on the island would have simply treated Yua's gruesome death as part of the movie of his world.

Just as Kugi had changed by meeting Inui and Kuzuhara, Inui also had changed—not much, but changed nonetheless—by meeting Kugi and Kuzuhara, and maybe even the island. And no one knew where this change would lead him.



Two hours later. A warehouse district somewhere on the mainland.

"...Let's get this started," said the rugged man as he checked his watch.

His subordinates—tension clear on their faces—were ready for the moment of truth.

The ritual called 'justice' was their source of income. But this was not justice—it wasn't even a farce. The men knew that better than anyone.

And even if this was a simple farce, they had already gone too far.

However, even those who had taken many lives on the artificial island felt a strange sense of tension when they had to do the same on the mainland.

The island was special to them.

It was a wonderland where anything was permitted.

Perhaps that was the thought ingrained in their minds.

Perhaps that thought was what allowed them to do such cruel things.

The boss must have sensed the changed air among the men. He cracked his neck with a grin.

"Where's the laughter here, chucklefucks? Laugh."

The men stiffened, but the boss snickered.

"There's always been a lot of demand for bad little girls. The second we sent the regulars her picture, one of them offered 2 million for the recording. And one of the regulars in the *other* business said he'd give us support as a token of appreciation."

"Support, boss?"

"S'right. We lost a shit-ton of weapons yesterday, but he got in touch this morning. He's coming in with a new shipment today."



"I'm Ginga Kanashima," said the man who appeared at the warehouse entrance. He fixed his sunglasses.

In the driver's seat of the small truck behind him was a workman. In the bed of the truck were things resembling sacks of cement.

"Ah. So you're the one the organization referred to us."

One of the goons walked right up to the sacks of cement and tore one open with a knife. Straw practically burst out of the sack—and in between the yellow were black, gleaming pieces of metal.

"...Looks good. You sure we can take these?"

"These models here are cheap and not very accurate. But they'll be enough to scare most anyone. They come with built-in suppressors. And don't worry about the price—I've already received my payment."

On one hand, the men were leery of the deadly-calm weapons dealer. On the other hand, they were practically swelling at the sight of all the weapons.

"I'd like to have a word with your superior to discuss the details."

"Whoa. Pat-down first."

"Just to warn you, I have a gun on hand for self-defense."

The weapons dealer pulled a handgun from his coat. He shook it lightly by the barrel.

"You're gonna have to leave it with us for now."

One of the goons took the gun, then patted down the man's suit and sides. He did not find any other firearms.

Still wary, they opened the warehouse door.

That was when it happened.

The weapons dealer named Ginga Kanashima was the first to point it out.

"...What is that?"

Kanashima turned. The men did as well—

And they spotted something drawing rapidly near.

Was it a motorcycle, they wondered. But they quickly realized that they did not hear an engine.

"...A bicycle?"

It was an unexpected method of transport. And as there was only one, the men did not assume the rider was hostile—

But the moment they glimpsed the splash of color in the man's hair, the goons paled.

A man was racing to the warehouse on a mountain bike, his rainbow-colored hair aflutter.

"Th-that's him! That's the son of a bitch!"

"Call the others!"

The goons panicked as though having accidentally disturbed a beehive. Some of them even grabbed guns from the bed of the truck.

The weapons dealer, however, remained unflappable. He tilted his body slightly and held out his right arm.

A moment later, a handgun popped out of his sleeve and entered his grip. Though it was small, from the length of the barrel the men guessed it must have been concealed in the crook of his arm.

"Shit!"

The weapons dealer ignored the flabbergasted men, instead shooting at the man on the mountain bike—

And at that moment, every ear heard the sound of the flying shell casing mixed in with a different noise.

The noise belonged to a gunshot muffled by a new type of suppressor. It sounded so unlike a normal gunshot that the men did not understand what had happened.

But the man on the bicycle seemed to realize before it was too late. He shifted his balance on the fly and leaned away.

"SWEET!"

He cut through the air; his rainbow-colored hair rose.

"...Hah! Jackass!"

With a grin, the man on the bicycle—Inui—took a hand off the handlebar and drew a gun.

His gun was also equipped with a suppressor. Hushed gunshots whipped toward the weapons dealer at subsonic speeds.

The weapons dealer glanced at his foe's gun and stood still, as though the shots would not hit him.

The bullets narrowly passed him by. But unlike Inui, the weapons dealer did not even flinch.

Instead, a man standing behind him was hit. He fell before he could even scream.

"K-kill him!"

A dozen men bolted out of the warehouse and opened fire. but Inui read their movements and swerved a second earlier, zooming into a gap between the containers.

"Get him!"

In unison, the men rushed into the gap. Inui could not so easily evade gunshots in such a narrow space.

The weapons dealer, however, did not move.

"Son of a bitch!" The man who had given him a pat-down ran over, swearing. "So you *did* have a gun on you!" He drew his gun and raised it up to the dealer's head—

But a second earlier, something clicked.

Another gun appeared, this time in the weapons dealer's left hand. It spat a chunk of lead into the goon's forehead.

Not even realizing that one of their friends had just been killed, the men who had gone after Inui drew their guns and reached a corner—and were faced with an unbelievable scene.

Inui had done a 180 on his bike and was now rushing towards them. The mountain bike, in fact, was barreling down along the wall.

The men tried to raise their guns, but it was too late.

Inui launched himself off the wall again and jumped over the men, keeping the bike nearly parallel to the ground. And in the same instant, he peppered the ground with multiple gunshots and took out three men at once.

He landed. Then, he looked up.

"The shit?!"

Before his eyes was the weapons dealer.

Though Inui had no idea that the dealer was going by the name of a dead man called Ginga Kanashima—

'*Kugi, you son of a bitch... What—are—you—doing here—?!*'

Pedaling forward, he escaped the line of fire.

And like before, a muffled noise passed by where he had been only a second earlier.

And the stray bullets drove themselves into the goons who had been behind him.

The weapons dealer, who was actually Seiichi Kugi in disguise, killed the rest of the men gathered there as though collecting leftovers.

And without a second thought, he turned his guns on Inui.

Inui read his line of fire and fled with a deft use of the bicycle, making sure to return fire all the while.

Kugi could no longer remain rooted to the spot. He leapt a second before it was too late.

However, only the first of Inui's shots had been aimed at Kugi. The rest hit the goons rushing out of the warehouse.

That was when the men guarding the back of the warehouse began to arrive. Inui and Kugi were now forced to continue the shootout.

Between kills, they did not forget to fire 'stray' shots at one another.

"Grk...fucked-up...bastards..."

The men fell one after another.

And when their helpless groans finally came to an end, Inui stopped his bike and turned to Kugi with a smirk.

"What were you trying to pull here?"

"...That's my line," Kugi said with a frown. Inui's excitement did not diminish.

"Shit. Who'd have thought we'd be firing away at each other on the mainland, too? There's no way this ain't fate. Didn't think you'd come all the way here."

At that point, Inui remembered something.

Kugi had once tried to kill Yua, leading Kuzuhara to pursue him.

"Hah! Makes sense now. You tryin' to make it up to Yua or Mr. Kuzuhara? Well look at you! Trying to win back some honor, eh?"

"...?"

"Or maybe your organization pushed you into this crap. Either way I'm just here to rescue the princess, so can we not get serious this time?" He said flippantly. But Inui's eyes remained as clear and alert as ever, scanning their surroundings like an attack dog.

His eyes were not only on Kugi, but on the truck, on the warehouse entrance, and the blind spots around them.

Kugi returned Inui's gaze with an icy glare of his own, also wary of his surroundings with all the alertness of a military dog.

A moment later, a low voice escaped the warehouse door.

"You asked for it, fuckers."

The voice was seething. From the tone it probably belonged to the boss of the group.

The owner of the voice was nowhere to be seen; he was likely taking cover somewhere inside.

Perhaps he had more support waiting in the warehouse.

"I'm not gonna pretend to get why the dealer the organization introduced is teaming up with Inui. So I'll pry the answers outta you both while you die."

Kugi silently let the bloodlust wash over him.

Inui's grin never left his face. "If that looked like teamwork to you, you need to get your eyes checked, asshole. Retire while you're at it. You couldn't tell apart Two-Face's two faces, let alone Batman and the Joker. The hell kinda champion of justice are you supposed to be?"

"Shut your hole! One wrong move, and I kill the girl."

For once, Inui's expression changed.

"Tch. Never heard of a champion of justice who takes hostages... Wait, never mind. I have."

If the man was holding Yua hostage, Inui had no choice but to be more careful than usual. He had to exploit any opening he could find.

'If we could just team up, we'd have this one in the bag.'

'Heh. As if that'd ever happen.'

'Kugi'd shoot me in the head before we could pull a co-op finisher.'

With an internal grimace, Inui stared at Kugi and in the direction of the enemy boss.

And—

"I heard what you said, Inui. Here to save the princess, eh?"

A rugged man finally emerged from the door, proudly showing off his hostage.

When Inui saw the girl, he—



The Western District. Iizuka's restaurant.

"I'm back!"

"Yua! Where were you?"

Ms. Iizuka and the volunteer police officer were floored when they saw Yua. But they quickly sighed in relief.

"Sorry. Nejiro said that he found a new route, so I just had to go take a look."

Ms. Iizuka, though relieved at Yua's safe return, sternly reprimanded her. "Yua. Your lunch got cold while we waited. If you knew you were going to be late, you should have called home."

"I'm sorry..."

The Iizuka children listened to the conversation and each made a comment—"Hey! Why aren't you hitting *her* with the knife?", "You're only nice to Yua, Ma!", "This is discrimination!", "Two-faced demon!", "Two-faced demon lady!"—but Yua smiled sheepishly.

Ms. Iizuka and the volunteer police were finally calm, and Yua was smiling as usual.

With no inkling of the horrors taking place on the mainland, the island lived as it always did.



"Huh...?"

The girl emerged as Inui and Kugi watched.

She stood behind the rugged man, watched by two of his goons.

Kugi did not even blink.

But Inui's eyes turned to dinner plates and his jaw dropped.

"Hey..."

"Now drop those guns."

"Hey, wait just a second here—"

"It's too late to beg for mercy!"

Inui ignored the threat and turned his attention back to the girl.

Dragged out behind the rugged man with handcuffs on her wrists was a girl with white flowers in her hair and a dead look in her eyes.

The girl barely reacted to Inui and Kugi's presence. She simply said,

"...Sleepy."

The boss's face twisted into a sickening grin.

"Heh! so the princess has no idea what she's in for! Lemme let you in on a little secret, princess. You and your little knights in shining armor are gonna fall asleep for good!" He roared, pointing his gun at Inui. "What's wrong? Consider yourself lucky you get to die with your princess—"

He felt an impact on his face.

"?!"

Numbness spread over his left eye. The man felt for a moment like the world had gone dark, but he soon snapped out of his daze and reaffirmed that the world was still quite bright.

With his still-functioning right eye he looked around for the source of the darkness—

"Wha...?"

And he realized that the girl standing at his left was no longer handcuffed.

She was toying with something in her hands. For some reason, her pale palms were wet with blood.

Then he understood.

The terrible understanding finally dawned on him.

The object in her hands—the little ball with a red tendon protruding from the surface—was his own left eyeball.

"Ah... Whaaaaaaa...? URGH! No...!"

The moment he realized that the girl had carved out his eye, his socket was overwhelmed by excruciating agony.

The goons behind the girl only then noticed what had happened. They pulled out their guns—

But the girl tossed the boss's eye into the air and grabbed the men's gun hands in one hand each, and forced them to point their guns at each other's legs.

Her fluid movements threw the men off-balance. They pulled the trigger before they realized what was happening.

Two gunshots. The men shot red holes into one another's kneecaps.

"AGH!" "GAH!"

The men screamed in unison. Then they felt impacts on their faces.

That was when the eyeball finally fell back down.

The girl—Lilei Ei—caught the falling eye, then tossed it back into the air along with her two new eyeballs as though juggling them.

"I do not have. Do not have pipe."

The men howled in agony. She spoke mechanically.

"I can not control. I will not control."

She had killed her emotions. But her lips were twisted into a faint smile.

"He kill Fei. He your friend?"

"?!"

It was an unfamiliar name.

Naturally, the men had no idea who Lilei was talking about.

The men who had jokingly called themselves 'champions of justice' did not know that, several days ago, a man who truly believed himself to be a champion of justice had killed the girl.

Even more ironic was the fact that this man's body had happened to fall next to those of the goons, and was taken care of by the Western District as one of the false champions of justice.

"Fei smile in dream. Now Fei smile. But I angry. You are not adorable."

But Lilei no longer cared if these men were connected to Fei's killer.

She simply had to follow her brother's orders to act as bait before joining forces with Kugi and destroying the group.

But when she sensed something similar about these people and the nightmares in her dreams, she allowed herself to make things slightly personal. And a second later, six eyeballs in total were in the air.

It signaled eternal darkness for three people.

"GAAAAAAAHH! AAAAAAAAARGH!"

The screams of the boss and his men blended into one homogenous noise. Lilei slowly handed down their verdict.

"You die. You die slowly."



Several minutes later. A medical facility in the Eastern District.

When the time came, the Guard Team gathered around Gitarin's computer with bated breath.

On the screen, they saw men lying on the floor.

"Huh? Where's the kid?" Zhang wondered, not sure if he should be relieved or not.

Gitarin seemed to have understood the situation.

"Aha. It looks like the Western District's taken care of this one."

Soon, a girl in a *qipao* entered the screen with a lead pipe in hand.

The flowers in her hair tipped off the Guard Team as to her identity.

The girl slowly raised her pipe, her gaze trained on the fallen men—

The Guard Team watched the grisly scene with disinterest for some time. Finally, Carlos broke the silence.

"So were these sorry shits after Inui because he had the website address and the login info?"

Gitarin smirked.

"Nah, they wouldn't go that far for something that petty."

"So what did he have?"

"Inui managed to get the list of all the rich and powerful folks who enjoyed these shows, along with all the transaction records proving their involvement."

Gitarin then opened up a certain file on the computer.

"Is this the list?" Asked Zhang. Gitarin nodded.

"It is. The people on this list are probably wetting their pants watching the stream. Since they helped fund the show, they can't just claim they stumbled onto the stream by coincidence. I'm thinking I should start calling them tonight to see how they'd react to us having their dirty secret. We can put up this info online to ruin them later. I can't wait to see how badly they react to this!"

"Classy, boss. Not that I sympathize with these sick fucks."

"We're not champions of justice, so we might as well have fun like the villains we are," Gitarin chortled, forgetting for the moment that he was still covered in bandages. "To be honest, I was kinda hesitant when Inui offered to sell us this info for a fortune. But then he said he'd give it to me for free if I agreed to give half the list to the Western District. Wouldn't you know it? I think our mad dog's trying to keep the balance of power in check in his own way."

Gitarin complimented Inui in one of the few ways he could and scanned the list of 1,500 names.

"You reap what you sow. But I do feel a little bad for the people on the other half of the list. Our sadistic tattooed friend in the West is probably going to extort them for as long as they live."



Somewhere in the Western District.

"Munch... So this is the info Inui sent us for free...munch. It's only half the list, but it's still got 1,500 names. There are more than a few famous people here. I guess that's because the group got in contact with famous people mostly. ...Munch."

Taifei munched on a Chinese meatball and watched Lilei's macabre dance on the screen as he handed Lihuang a pile of documents.

Lihuang sighed in disbelief.

"...It almost disturbs me to watch you gorging on food while watching something like this."

"I don't want to hear that from a man who stinks of blood all-year round. Munch...it doesn't help my appetite, but I'm the one who gave Lilei these orders—I shouldn't look away."

It was an admirable sentiment, but the meatball in his hand negated much of his dignity. Lihuang half-listened to Taifei and scanned the list.

"We'll use this list to advance our business even further. Now the organization will grow stronger than ever before."

"That list alone was enough to pass off Kugi as a weapons dealer; it's definitely powerful. Hayato Inui ended up stealing a lot of his work, but oh well. ...Man, these meatballs are good even when they get cold. I'd better stock up."

Taifei downed one meatball after another, but Lihuang ignored him and smiled with the list in hand.

"I almost pity the souls on the Eastern District's half of this list. Gitarin the sick deviant will play them like puppets for as long as they live."



Several minutes earlier. The warehouse district on the mainland.

Lilei dragged the groaning men into the warehouse. The man who had been in the driver's seat of the truck hurried after her, grabbing her lead pipe from the back.

He glanced at Kugi, who silently ordered him to go with Lilei. The man disappeared inside without a second thought.

Two dogs stared each other down by the warehouse, the silence broken only by the crashing waves.

"Now what?" Naturally, Inui spoke first. "How many shots d'you have left? One in your left hand, if my math is right."

Kugi did not respond. He raised his left hand.

"You too, right? You have one shot left."

"We've got a math genius here, folks! But that's only *if* I had a full magazine when I got here."

"..."

"...Wanna give it a shot?"

Inui copied Kugi and raised his right hand.

So smooth was the motion that it was like looking at a mirror.

"So we're holding each other at gunpoint again."

Inui chuckled bitterly. But there wasn't a hint of annoyance on his face.

He almost sounded like he had been looking forward to this reunion.

"You still hate me?"

"Who knows?"

A breeze.

Inui's smirk widened. And he asked a question with a very obvious answer.

"So why're you pointing that gun at me?"

"Because you're pointing your gun at me."

Gunfire.

Two shots resounded at once, and the two bullets cut through the roar of the waves.

Each bullet was driven into a target, tearing through fabric and destroying a heart.

"..."

"..."

Inui and Kugi's gazes wandered behind one another.

Both heard similar gasps of pain behind themselves.

Both saw the surviving goons fall to the ground, their guns still in hand.

"Whoa. Hey. That was our first real co-op finisher."

"..."

"See? It's not all bad."

In spite of Inui's enthusiasm, Kugi remained sullen.

If the two goons hadn't coincidentally survived and stood behind the dogs, the duel would have ended in one way or another.

Inui put away his gun and sighed.

"Christ. First the suicidal son of a bitch gets in the way, and then these mindless shits show up. People just keep interrupting us—starting with Mr. Kuzuhara way back when."

"...Yeah."

"If us always shooting at each other is fate, maybe never getting to finish our fights is fate too," Inui joked. But Kugi smiled and shook his head.

"I refuse to let fate describe my life."

He was not smiling because he had come to a resolution. Kugi was smiling because he had resigned himself.

"I killed Kanae. I escaped to this island. I did all this of my own free will. ... Isn't that how it works?" He said in a rare show of emotion.

Inui put on a smile—a different one from Kugi's—and nodded.

"You got that right."

Another breeze.

"...Well, I'm off now. I'm only here because of a misunderstanding. Don't feel like hanging around long enough for the cops to bust my ass."

They must not speak any longer, Inui must have concluded. He slowly turned.

But as he climbed onto his bike, he half-turned to Kugi again.

"You know what? I'm still gonna believe in fate after all. We're *fated* to pull some crazy shit together again."

He chuckled. He laughed.

With a wicked grin on his face, the mad dog finally said the magic word.

"Later."

The hound showed no emotion as he mirrored his fellow dog.

"...Later."

Only the crashing of waves filled the warehouse district. The two dogs did not look back at each other.



But they had not lost interest.

They would meet again, and bark at one other again.

But now was not the time.

Knowing this, the dogs slipped away from the commotion in their own ways.

Like a dog finally recognizing its own reflection in the mirror and turning to depart.

-End-

Exit

The fountain square.

"So there was a shitstorm of blood on the mainland, is that it? Good going, Kuzu."

"I just patrolled the Western District like I always do. I didn't do a thing this time around."

"C'mon, cut the humility. You've got no idea how much influence your 'like always' has on the island. Heehahahahaha," Kelly chortled, adjusting the TV from atop a stepladder. "Inui jumped in 'case he thought Yua got kidnapped, didja hear? He's more of a softie than he lets on! Heehahahaha!"

"Who knows what goes through his mind?" Kuzuhara chuckled bitterly, holding the stepladder.

"But hey, now the boiled zombies are gone, right?"

"Probably because they're out of material. They don't see any profit in continuing operations on the island," Kuzuhara replied coldly, masking his rage and his inkling about the incidents.

Kelly grinned and continued the conversation. It was hard to tell if she was trying to be considerate or rude.

"'Champions of justice' goin' around butchering people. It's funny *and* unfunny. When I was little, I used to think shit like how there was no good or evil in the world, but now I enjoy this island so much that good or evil doesn't even matter anymore! Heehahahaha!" Kelly howled in laughter, her voice just as childish as the content of her claims. Kuzuhara played along.

"I won't say that a true champion of justice—one that isn't just self-righteous—doesn't exist. But people like that aren't commonplace. The best we can get are the superheroes we see in movies," Kuzuhara said coolly. Kelly opened her mouth to respond—

—but a loud voice escaped the radio on Kuzuhara's belt and put an end to their time alone.

<Where are you, Mr. Kuzuhara?!>

"What's wrong?"

<Trouble, sir! The Rats got into a mess in the Western District again, and the Iizuka kids all got caught with them!>

"I'm on my way. Where exactly?"

When the subordinate gave him the location, Kuzuhara turned to Kelly with a serious look.

"Sorry to ditch you in the middle of work. I'll be back."

"The hell're you apologizing for, Kuzu? Get your ass over there and go wild and die for the crazy kids who're gonna run the island someday! Come back soon! Heehahahahaha!"

With Kelly's maniacal laughter at his back, Kuzuhara left the square.

Kelly did not even watch him depart. She climbed the stepladder and gazed into the screen she had just finished checking.

"You know, Souji? I'm not asking for a champion of justice."

Her voice was low, but there was a smile on her face.

"But I see the island's—and my—protector right here."

Reflected on the dark screen was Kuzuhara, running to the scene.

And the many islanders going to and fro at the center of the city.

Kelly watched the flow of people and began scanning for the next main character.

From the main characters of her next radio broadcast to the main characters who disappeared without their actions ever coming to the surface—they all circulated the island equally.

Convinced that the island itself was a hero of sorts, Kelly trembled in anticipation and reached for the power button.

The screen came to life, and—

-End-



Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Ryohgo Narita. And this is a short story anthology from what I like to call the Etsusa Bridge series.

If you've bought this book solely because of the funny title, I think you'll enjoy it a lot more if you were to begin with the preceding stories, *Bow Wow!*, *Mew Mew!*, and the *Garuguru!* books. Regretting not creating one series title to unify the books isn't much different from crying over spilled milk. And milk is great, especially with cookies. Want one?

...Sorry about the confusion.

In any event, I'd like to thank loyal readers of the Etsusa Bridge series for waiting so long! It's hard to tell if this really is a short story anthology or if it's a full-length book, but *5656!* involves three stories for you to enjoy—Inui vs. Kugi, Lilei's nap stories, and a romantic comedy set on the island.

I remember saying this before, but Lilei and Nazuna originally come from Mr. Suzuhito Yasuda's illustrations. Even I had no idea how large their roles would become. Thank you, Mr. Yasuda! This is why you can never underestimate your battles (?) against your illustrator.

I'm not very accustomed to painting pictures of daily life, so I have my doubts that I've managed to accurately convey the flow of things on the island to the readers. But please step in with the mindset of a tourist on a visit.

For *5656! 2* (tentative title), Kuzuhara and Nejiro's heartful game of hide-and-seek (gunfire and explosions included), a crime action story involving a certain battle in Mr. Take and Mr. Gen's past, and the Iizuka children's adventure are stories I'm considering. So I'd like to ask all the Kuzuhara fans, Nejiro fans, and Mr. Take fans (do they even exist?) to be patient with me.

As for myself, many things happened in my life. My chair broke, I threw up blood and had to go in for an endoscopy (it turned out to have been a minor case of Mallory-Weiss syndrome, which wasn't a problem), and I tried to stretch my neck and heard a very loud *crack!*, which led to my neck not moving for a week. But I am doing all right.

I have a lot on my plate for next year, so I plan to recover somehow and continue writing. I'd like to get myself settled down so I can work on a new *Hariyama-san* story, or a modern-day robot battle series, or a nonhuman butler series or an ordinary romantic comedy, but that might still be years off! If only there were three of me.

This is the kind of stuff I fantasize about every day.

But when I tell people that I want to write an ordinary romantic comedy, everyone tells me that's impossible. "What'd you say? Lemme show you my romantic comedy spirit!" was the thought I had in mind as I wrote 'Lips x Lips', the fourth story in the book.

I do wonder if it really is a romantic comedy, though. If you set up Nazuna's girls with the Iizuka boys on a group date, I'm sure you'd get a heartwarming story, like the kids going on a picnic. Can I? I guess not.

I've also written for a collaboration novel this summer, and a sort of spin-off to Castlevania in Dengeki Bunko MAGAZINE Special Edition: *Toradora* vs. *Index*. It looks like I'll have the chance to do a lot more, thanks to all of your support. Thank you!

On to another topic.

Mr. Yasuda's *Yozakura Quartet* anime and Mr. Haruaki Katou (who submitted a *Bow Wow!* illustration and won the Dengeki illustration competition)'s *Hyakko!* anime are both currently being broadcast. So I'd like to ask readers to tune in to these series and other Dengeki Bunko anime as well! (I'm not sure what to tell you if they somehow overlap with Dengeki anime.)

As usual, below are some words of thanks.

I'd like to thank my editor Mr. Papio, head editor-in-chief Mr. Suzuki (his title's changed!), editor-in-chief Jasmine, my friend K (the model for Lottie), and everyone from the editorial department.

I'm also grateful to the proofreaders and designers, the managing department, the publicity department, the publishing department, and

everyone at Media Works for showing so much patience as I continue to miss my deadlines.

I'd also like to thank my family, friends, and acquaintances, and everyone from S city.

To Mr. Suzuhito Yasuda, who drew a nosebleed-inducing number of characters for the cover in spite of his incredibly busy schedule—congratulations on the anime adaptation of *Yozakura Quartet*!

And finally, I'd like to thank all my readers.

You have my deepest gratitude. Thank you so much!

September 2008, at home
Moved to tears by my comfortable new Aeron chair

Ryohgo Narita

Chapter Titles

The chapter titles in this volume of the Etsusa Bridge series involve puns that were incredibly difficult to translate. Unlike in *Garuguru!*, I was unable to localize them in a satisfactory way—largely because of the secondary meanings given to the titles by the *furigana*, which are usually used simply as pronunciation guides for the characters.

Chapter 1: Dog vs. Dog

Original title: 犬vs.犬 (furigana: ワンワン *wanwan*)

Explanation: Dog vs. Dog (furigana: onomatopoeia for a dog barking; 'one one')

Chapter 2: Sleep=Death

Original title: 眠=死 (furigana: スヤスヤ *suyasuya*)

Explanation: Sleep=Death (furigana: onomatopoeia for breathing in one's sleep, similar to 'zzz' in English)

Chapter 3: Bow? Wow!

Original title: 吼えるよ? 吼えるよ! (furigana: わんわん *wanwan*)

Explanation: Bark? Bark! (furigana: onomatopoeia for a dog barking)

Chapter 4: Lips x Lips

Original title: 唇x唇 (furigana: チュウチュウ *chūchū*)

Explanation: Lips x Lips (furigana: onomatopoeia for kissing; the sound of mice squeaking)

Chapter 5: 1 & 1

Original title: 1 & 1 (furigana: ワンワン)

Explanation: 1 & 1 (furigana: onomatopoeia for a dog barking)

Volume Title: 5656!

Explanation: The title is read as *gorogoro*, which is supposedly an onomatopoeia for rolling about (like an animal might).



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